

# Spirit-Led Freedom: Examining A Significant Detail in Galatians

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I come to the writing of this article having just led a course on Galatians for a group of Quakers. The Quaker tradition rejects law as its organising principle; instead it has a set of structures for discerning the present guidance of the Spirit for the individual and community. In the 1660s, the time of religious upheaval in which they emerged, Quakers had to distinguish themselves as a group from Ranters, whose rejection of law led to gross indulgence. So, from then on, throughout Quaker history there has been an emphasis on faithful and tested responsiveness to guidance by the Spirit. Direction and discipline there has been but always with a concern not to allow these to become an external imposition. Paul had a similar problem in presenting his gospel: how do I affirm continuing moral discipline alongside the radical nature of freedom in the Spirit?

My focus in this article is a single Greek root in its noun and verb form, *stoicheia* and *stoicheō*. The verb is often loosely translated, 'to walk', 'to follow', 'to be guided'; the noun is broadly translated in two different ways: 'elemental spirits' (NRSV) or 'elemental principles' (NJB). Translators of the verb make a choice based on the context in which it is used; the noun presents greater problems of interpretation which we will be considering.

This article aims to show how this word has a simple, definite meaning. It is a word used by Paul to indicate the nature of the guidance that has replaced law. The root meaning of the noun is a 'line', 'row' or 'series'. It was used for the 'A, B, C' of something, its elementary components. We will see how Paul is working with this fundamental image of 'alignment' in both noun and verb. My proposal is that it is because it has a hard and firm definition that it is used by Paul to bring clarity to more difficult theological concepts. It is this fact that makes it important to get this word right. For it is not just an interesting academic sideline. The consequence of discovering the clear consistent meaning of this

relatively simple word is to raise major questions about substantial aspects of Paul's understanding of the new life in Christ.

In order to get clear about Paul's use of this word, we will not only use passages in Galatians, but also one passage where the verb is used in Romans. Looking briefly at two short passages in Colossians will provide confirmation for the interpretation of the noun.

### **The translation of *stoicheō***

#### Keep aligned by the Spirit

In Galatians, Paul first uses the word *stoicheō* in the context of living by the Spirit (using the RSV in this section allows the key point about translation to be seen most clearly). The translation of *stoicheō* as 'walk' occurs right at the end of the passage and is italicised:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and do not (Greek - *you definitely will not*) gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law. ... [T]he fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also *walk* by the Spirit (Gal 5:16-18, 22-25, RSV).

Paul is discussing the motivation for behaviour and making an absolute contrast between walking by the Spirit and walking by the flesh. The omitted verses simply list the consequences of living by the flesh. By leaving them out it is possible to get a clearer view of the significant issue.

The sense of the Greek in the opening sentence is emphatic: '[W]alk (*peripateite*) by the Spirit, and you will *definitely not* gratify the desires of the flesh.'<sup>1</sup> Paul says further that 'if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.' The point is very simple: against the fruit of the Spirit 'there is no law'; in other words, such is the nature of Spirit-led life that no law will be necessary, you are no longer 'under the law'. The flesh, which is the source of those aspects of human behaviour which the law

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<sup>1</sup> Dunn James D. G., *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, London: A&C Black, 1993, p.297.

opposes, has been crucified in those who belong to Christ Jesus; the passions and desires of the flesh which necessitate law are no longer operative. This is the straightforward sense of the Greek.

It needs a little careful attention to see the effect of the RSV translation in significantly distorting the interpretation of *stoicheō*. That distortion occurs because of the way the sentences at the beginning and end of the above passage are translated. To see this it is helpful to quote them together:

But I say, walk (*peripateite*) by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ... If we live by the Spirit, let us also *walk* by the Spirit. (Gal 5:16,25, RSV)

To put the issue simply, by the imprecise translation of these two sentences which frame this passage on the Spirit, Paul's meaning has been changed from a *description* of life in the Spirit to a general *exhortation* to live by the Spirit. Compare this alternative, which as well as significantly changing the meaning of the first sentence also introduces the image of 'alignment' for *stoicheō*:

But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will definitely not gratify the desires of the flesh. ... Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we have come to life by the Spirit, let us also keep aligned by the Spirit. (Gal 5:16,24f, author's translation)

This second translation aims to capture the sharp dividing lines that are there in the meaning of Paul's Greek. There is no vagueness. The first half of the phrase is concerned with the initiation into a new way of living; it connects directly with the previous sentence. The flesh was crucified and the new life came by the Spirit. There is an exhortation here but it is very precise. Paul is not saying: because you now live by the Spirit carry on as someone who lives by the Spirit ought to live ('walk by the Spirit'). Rather he says: you came to life by the Spirit, now stay aligned, keep being guided, by that Spirit. He is stating that that dramatic beginning in which the Spirit was first evident in the community brought a transformation which still provides the way of living - the way of determining what to do. To put this another way, his exhortation is not about conduct; it is rather about remaining in a fundamentally changed way of living that *inevitably* brings a transformation of behaviour. Paul is clearly talking about real change in people: the fruits of the Spirit and the

lack of the passions and desires of the flesh both issue without any doubt from living by the Spirit.

### Keep aligned by faith

This section is concerned with a passage which, whilst interesting itself, strikingly confirms the core meaning of alignment in *stoicheō*. Paul is speaking of Abraham. The English translation for *stoicheō* is italicized:

The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also *follow the example* of the faith that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom 4:11f, NRSV)

'Follow the example' is a paraphrase of the Greek. The NIV takes us nearer to a literal translation:

And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also *walk* in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised. (Rom 4:12, NIV)

The phrase 'in the footsteps' which disappears in the NRSV translation is there in the Greek. The meaning of *stoicheō* is being understandably treated in a malleable way in order to relay the Greek words idiomatically into English. 'Walking in the footsteps' in the NIV is a good image to accurately convey what Paul is saying.

What is of real importance in establishing the core meaning of the word is that, while 'to walk' is used in conjunction with 'in the footsteps' to create a comfortable English idiom, using 'to keep aligned' leads to exactly the same image in this passage. 'Keeping aligned in the footsteps of', whilst not an idiomatic English phrase has exactly the same sense; it is the vivid and meaningful image of walking, as it were, in single file along the same path as Abraham. This is the first step in establishing that this word has a simple precise meaning which does not vary in the variety of contexts in which it is used. Translating *stoicheō* as 'to keep aligned' in this passage does not lead to any change in sense from other English translations. This is not true of the next passage in which the connection of *stoicheō* with alignment brings a sharp focus which is not present in other translations.

### Keep aligned by the cross

The whole of Galatians is an argument by Paul against the idea that Gentiles need to be circumcised in order to fully receive the benefits of faith. Paul is finishing the letter by saying that those who are insisting on circumcision are doing so, ‘only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ.’ He continues:

May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will *follow* this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. (Gal 6:14-16, NRSV)

The RSV uses ‘walk’ instead of ‘follow’ to translate *stoicheō*:

Peace and mercy be upon all who *walk* by this rule, upon the Israel of God. (Gal 6:14-16, RSV)

As we will see, using either ‘follow’ or ‘walk’ for *stoicheō* in this passage means that the image Paul is presenting is completely lost. It is very unclear what Paul would intend by the phrase ‘all who walk by (or ‘follow’) this rule’, a fact which leads to many paragraphs of complicated commentary. Discovering Paul’s vivid image depends on the interpretation of two other words in addition to *stoicheō*: ‘cross’ and ‘rule’.

‘Cross’ (*stauros*) is understandably almost totally identified with the Roman instrument of execution, but the Greek word simply means a ‘pale’ as in ‘a spiked post for a fence’ or ‘stake’. While ‘pale’ is rarely used in modern English, it does allow an insight into the vivid way in which Paul is speaking of himself:

May I never boast of anything except the pale (*stauros*) of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been impaled (*estaurōtai*) to me, and I to the world. (Gal 6:14, adapted NRSV)

The sharp wooden stake on which Jesus died has become the means by which the world has died to Paul, and Paul to the world.

The word translated ‘rule’ (*kanōn*) has a closely related meaning. The reason the word comes to be used for ‘rule’ is that its root meaning is that of a straight stick. However, a straight stick, as well as being useful as a

ruler, can also be used as a boundary marker and the Greek word can also carry the sense of a demarcated territory. Paul himself uses the word with this latter sense in the second letter to the Corinthians when he speaks of the particular area in which he has preached the gospel. In the RSV, *kanōn* is translated ‘field’:

We do not boast beyond limit, in other men’s labours; but our hope is that as your faith increases, our *field* among you may be greatly enlarged, so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's *field*. (2 Cor 10:15f, RSV)

In this passage Paul is clearly distinguishing the areas designated to him for preaching the gospel – the NRSV replaces ‘field’ with ‘sphere of action’. Although the RSV translates the word *kanōn* as ‘field’, the sense the word contains can still be detected in our ancient words for pointed sticks, ‘stake’ and ‘pale’. We still speak of someone being ‘beyond the pale’ meaning ‘outside of the accepted limit’, and of ‘staking out a claim’ meaning ‘marking out our area.’ Although the English word ‘stake’ may now carry unhelpful resonances, it still enables sense to be made of the passage:

...our hope is that as your faith increases, our stake among you may be greatly enlarged... (2 Cor 10:15, adapted NRSV)

The very clear and powerful image that is operating in Paul's thought opens to us once the literal meaning of these words is seen. It comes through connecting the pale on which Jesus died with ‘a boundary marking stake’ rather than ‘rule’, combined with the proposal of ‘to keep aligned’ rather than ‘to walk’:

May I never boast of anything except the *pale* of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been *impaled* to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will *keep aligned by this stake* - peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God. (Gal 6:14-16, adapted NRSV)

The ‘pale’ referred to is the cross; Paul says that this is the ‘stake’ or ‘boundary marker’ by which to keep aligned; nothing else, whether circumcision or uncircumcision, can be trusted. Confirmation for the accuracy of this vivid image follows in the next verse, in which Paul again refers to the cross:

From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body. (Gal 6:17, NRSV)

The Greek word translated here ‘marks’ (*stigma*) is the source of our English word, ‘stigmata’ and means ‘marks made by a something pointed’.

### **The translation of *stoicheia***

Paul's two uses of the plural noun occur close together in a single significant passage and, in the RSV, are translated ‘elemental spirits’:

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is owner of all the estate; but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the *elemental spirits* of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ... Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly *elemental spirits*, whose slaves you want to be once more? You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I am afraid I have laboured over you in vain (Gal 4:1-5, 8-11, RSV).

E. P. Sanders says of this section of Galatians that ‘[Paul's] statements would make a systematist shudder.’<sup>2</sup> The reason for Sanders’s view is the apparent confusion in the way Paul contrasts the past ‘when we were children’ with the present now the time has ‘fully come’. He is speaking of himself and his readers when he says ‘we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe.’ There is no doubt he is speaking of both Jews and Gentiles when he speaks of that former situation. To put Jew and Gentile on the same footing as slaves to the ‘elemental spirits of the universe’ is extraordinary. While he says in other places that both Jew and Gentile need to come to the faith Jesus has made possible, Paul always affirms the importance of the Jewish commitment to the one true God in contrast to the pagan worship of ‘unrighteous’ Gentiles.

But, as his argument is followed through in this translation, the next use of the word seems to confirm this is his view. He says to the Galatians,

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<sup>2</sup> Sanders, E. P., *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*, London: SCM Press, 1983, p.68.

‘you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods’ and then chides them for seeking to turn back again ‘to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits.’ Given that the larger issue which Paul is dealing with is whether Gentile Galatians need to be circumcised, what Paul is saying is that it is precisely by being circumcised, that is, by accepting a prescription of the law of Moses, that the Galatians will be returning to ‘bondage to beings that by nature are no gods.’ The implication is that to follow the law of Moses is equivalent to the worship of elemental spirits – ‘beings that by nature are no gods’ - an identification that Paul makes nowhere else. The purpose of the following argument will be to make clear it is in the inaccuracy of the translation ‘elemental spirits’ that Paul’s meaning becomes distorted and apparently unsystematic. Several points will need to be presented in sequence in order to support a fresh interpretation of this passage.

#### Translation - Point 1

The proposed meaning for the word *stoicheia* which is translated above ‘elemental spirits’ is ‘things which keep aligned’ or ‘things that give direction’. There is no single English word to replicate this phrase and in order to follow the argument we will use the Greek word with the clumsy *things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’* in brackets. With this change, the two phrases where the word occurs now read as follows:

...we were slaves to the *stoicheia (things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’)* of the universe (Gal 4:3, adapted RSV).

...how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly *stoicheia (things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’)*? (Gal 4:9, adapted RSV)

#### Translation - Point 2

In the phrase ‘enslaved to the *stoicheia (things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’)*’, the preposition ‘to’ is more simply translated ‘under’ as in the AV and NIV:

...we were slaves *under* the *stoicheia (things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’)* of the universe (Gal 4:3, adapted RSV).

#### Translation - Point 3

No detailed attempt will be made here to investigate the meaning of the word translated ‘universe’ (*kosmos*). In the NRSV it is translated ‘world’.

What is important for the present discussion is that Paul uses the word to contrast created things – the things of ‘the world’ – with the things ‘of God’. One example will suffice to demonstrate the point:

Now we have received not the spirit of the world (*kosmos*), but the Spirit that is from God ... (1 Cor 2:12, NRSV).

To clarify the proposed translation it is helpful to assume that the same contrast is there in Paul’s mind when he is speaking of the *stoicheia*. In modern English, the translation ‘worldly’ captures the way Paul is using the word of something that is created and inferior to something of the divine order:

...we were enslaved under the *worldly stoicheia* (*things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’*) (Gal 4:3, adapted RSV).

#### Translation - Point 4

‘To be enslaved’, a translation which carries strongly negative associations, can equally well be accurately replaced with ‘to be in servitude’ or ‘to serve’. As was stated above, Paul's first use is referring to both Jew and Gentile:

So with us; when we were children, we were *in servitude* under the earthbound *stoicheia* (*things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’*) (Gal 4:3, adapted RSV).

This indicates that Paul is quite able to refer to the law of Moses as one of the ‘worldly *stoicheia*’. In the second use of the word, Paul is definitely referring to his Gentile audience who, unlike the Jews, ‘were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods’:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods... (Gal 4:8, RSV).

The passage continues:

...but now that you have come to know God, or rather be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly *stoicheia* (*things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’*)...? You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I am afraid that I have laboured over you in vain (Gal 4:9f, RSV).

Having omitted one phrase in the above, a clear meaning of *stoicheia* can be seen which carries the same sense whether Paul is talking about something that the Jews were ‘in servitude under’ or something ‘weak and beggarly’ that the Gentiles were in danger of turning back to. Neither of these two uses are referring to something that is served in itself. Two points on either side of the use of *stoicheia* in the passage above help make the meaning clear. Paul finishes by lamenting that ‘you observe days, and months, and seasons, and years!’ Paul is using an exclamatory phrase to refer here in shorthand to the central fact that unites the previous practice of both Jew and Gentile. The observance of a religious calendar is a central part of any religious law. And he is contrasting this former state of religious observance for both Jew and Gentile with the direct experience of God’s will ‘now that you have come to know God, or rather be known by God’. *Stoicheia* is a word Paul is using for ‘religious laws or observances’ – things which give ‘direction for behaviour’ or ‘keep the religious adherent aligned on their path’ whether those directions come from the law of Moses or the religious traditions of the Gentiles. The distinction in Paul’s mind is between a mediated way of knowing God’s will and coming ‘to know God, or ... be known by God’. You have come to that better knowledge; do not go back.

#### Translation - Point 5

What makes this simple identification of *stoicheia* with religious laws apparently impossible is a phrase that follows the second use of the word:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly *stoicheia*, whose slaves you want to be once more? (Gal 4:8-10, adapted RSV)

In the phrases which speak of being ‘in bondage’ to ‘beings that by nature are no gods’ and being ‘slaves’ to ‘the weak and beggarly *stoicheia*’, ‘to be in bondage’ and ‘to be slaves’ are both translating the same Greek word. Paul is saying that the Galatians, who were formerly in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods are now wanting to be in bondage once again. The structure of the sentence in the RSV translation above can only lead to one conclusion: the *stoicheia* must be describing those ‘beings that by nature are no gods’ to which the Galatians once again wish to be in bondage. If this is the case then it indicates that it means that the attempt to link the meaning of *stoicheia* and *stoicheō* in the way

pursued above breaks down. However, close attention to Paul's Greek yields an alternative sense for the second section of the passage.

The alternative translation, which significantly alters the meaning of the passage, hinges on the interpretation of one pronoun, 'whose', of the phrase, 'whose slaves you want to be once more' which has been put in italics above. *There is no grammatical reason why this pronoun and with it this whole phrase which is connected in English translations with 'elemental spirits' cannot instead refer to the 'beings that by nature are no gods'.* It is difficult to translate this smoothly into English but Paul's sense then becomes that by turning back to the *stoicheia*, in this case, the practice of the law of Moses, the Galatians want to leave being 'kept aligned' by the living Spirit of God and to turn back to a weak and beggarly form of religious direction which for the Gentile Galatians is a turning back to their old ways – 'to beings that are no gods'.

Paul's sentence seems to be overloaded and what follows is a paraphrase but one which seeks to stay as close as possible to the phrases of the RSV translation we have been following:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods, *whose slaves you want to be once more*, for now that you have come to know God, or rather be known by God, how can you turn back to the weak and beggarly *stoicheia* (*things that 'keep aligned'/'give direction for behaviour'*)? You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! I am afraid I have laboured over you in vain (Gal 4:8-10, adapted RSV).

In this translation, 'beings that by nature are no gods' are not themselves *stoicheia* but Paul is referring to the fact that the service of them must involve the following of religious rules including the observance of a religious calendar and in this respect there is common ground with the law of Moses.

*So Paul is saying that the Jews were in servitude under the law of Moses and the Gentile Galatians served 'beings that by nature are no gods' but not that the law of Moses has an equivalent status to 'beings that by nature are no gods'. The equivalence in the situation of Jew and Gentile was in the servitude under religious things that 'keep aligned'/'give direction for behaviour'.*

## Comment – Colossians

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the *elemental spirits of the universe*, and not according to Christ (Colossians 2:8).

Replacing ‘elemental spirits of the universe’ with the understanding presented above of ‘worldly *stoicheia* (*things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’*)’ makes good sense:

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the *worldly stoicheia* (*things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’*), and not according to Christ (Colossians 2:8, adapted NRSV).

The ‘worldly *stoicheia*’ are being linked with ‘human tradition’ and contrasted with the way of Christ.

The second use coming a few verses later offers striking support for the proposed interpretation:

If with Christ you died to the *elemental spirits of the universe*, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world? Why do you submit to regulations, ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings (Colossians 2:20).

The thrust of the question as it is in Greek is more literally expressed in the adaptation below:

If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you submit to regulations, living as if you still belonged to the world?

In the light of the work on *stoicheia* above, this passage now makes very clear sense:

If with Christ you died to the *worldly stoicheia* (*things that ‘keep aligned’/‘give direction for behaviour’*), why do you submit to regulations, living as if you still belonged to the world? ‘Do not

handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'? All these regulations refer to things that perish with use; they are simply human commands and teachings. (Colossians 2:20, adapted NRSV)

The same contrast occurs here as was noted in the previous section but even more clearly. Coming to Christ involved dying to religious regulations - a worldly form of direction for behaviour. It is clear that Paul can refer to the Jewish law in this way. 'Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch'; Paul's point is that these regulations are all concerned with 'worldly things', literally, as stated in this passage, 'things that perish with use'. Having come to faith, to pick up such regulations again is turning away from the freedom of the living God and turning back to worldly traditions.

### **Conclusion: No Place for Religious Law**

Now that you have come by faith to know God, or rather to be known by God, in that God, through his Spirit, has revealed his will to you directly, how can you go back to the old second rate, inferior way of discovering God's will, by following a written code of law, even the law of Moses? (Gal 4:9, paraphrase)

This is a simple but extraordinarily confident assertion of the real experience of change that Paul has witnessed among the Galatians. Living by the Spirit is entry into a new intimacy with God, characterized by knowing or being known by God. Guidance from the Spirit arises from this new openness to God in which God's will is revealed directly; any law, even the law of Moses, is, by comparison, an inferior way of knowing God's will. Just as when discussing the verb the attempt was made to demonstrate that the defence of a firm, consistent meaning in this peripheral word would have consequences for appreciating Paul's understanding of the Spirit, so, with this interpretation, there can be no question of Paul retaining any place for religious law in his understanding of life in the Spirit. The sharpness and precision of his thought rules this out. For Paul, living by faith, by the Spirit, by the cross is undermined by any religious law, Jewish or Gentile.