

The Term “Flesh” in Galatians

Oliver O’Donovan

What follows is a very helpful and succinct exposition of Paul’s use of the term “flesh” in the Epistle to the Galatians. Verses pertinent to the discussion are quoted (NKJV) following O’Donovan’s explanation, which is taken from his book, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics, Second Edition*, pp. 13-14 (used with permission of the author).

WE first meet the term ‘flesh’ (*sarx*) in Galatians in respect of the merely human, which of itself has no power to effect its own justification (2:16), though its life may be the natural context for life lived ‘by faith in the Son of God’ (2:20). But the flesh becomes dangerous when it is conceived as an alternative source of strength to the Spirit (3:3). In the Christian life there must always be maintained a paradoxical tension between the weakness of the flesh and the strength of the gospel which is heard and lived through it (4:13-14). The tendency of the natural to degenerate into the rebellious is illustrated by the story of Ishmael and Isaac: the one who was born ‘naturally’ (*kata sarka*) and who becomes hostile to the one born of divine promise (4:23), who represents an alternative source of strength, the Spirit (4:29). Up to this point the rivalry is conceived entirely in terms of moral power, of the pretensions of the flesh to justify man through ‘works of the law’. But inevitably an autonomous human power seeks fulfilment in its own self-expression, and so we find the flesh taking occasion not only of law but of freedom to assert itself against the Spirit (5:13). The mutual antipathy of Spirit and flesh (5:17) unites both flesh as ‘desire’ (*epithymia*) and flesh as ‘law’ (*nomos*) (5:16, 18). Saint Paul will reject at least one reading of Aristotle’s doctrine that ‘sin is multiple’. The unity of the principle of life by the Spirit evokes a kind of shadow-unity among the different modes of rebellion. Whether it appears as law or as licence, the ultimate fact about life according to flesh is that it is a refusal of life in the Spirit. In the last resort legalism is not characterized by its delight in the law, but simply by its taking the merely and exclusively human, the flesh, as the object of its ‘boasting’, rather than the divine work of the cross of Christ (6:13-14).

Galatians 2:16: . . . knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.

2:20: I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

3:3: Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?

4:13-14: You know that because of physical infirmity I preached the gospel to you at the first. And my trial which was in my flesh you did not despise or reject, but you received me as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus.

4:23: But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, . . .

4:29: But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now.

5:13: For you, brethren, have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

5:16-18: I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

6:13-14: For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh. But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.



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