What the Galatians Want: A Fresh Look at ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε in Galatians 5:17

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ABSTRACT In Gal 5:17, Paul teaches that the Spirit and the flesh are diametrically opposed to each other "so that you do not do whatever you want [ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε]." Interpreters have understood ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε to refer to (1) both the desires of the Spirit and the desires of the flesh, (2) the desires of the Spirit, (3) the desires of the flesh, or (4) neither the desires of the Spirit nor the desires of the flesh. This study examines the exegetical factors that have led scholars to affirm one view over the others and presents fresh evidence in favor of interpreting ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as fleshly desires from Paul's use of θέλω with respect to the Galatians elsewhere in the letter.

KEYWORDS Gal 5:16–17, Spirit, flesh, desires, Pauline anthropology

Galatians 5:17 is widely recognized as one of the more contentious verses in a letter that, to say the least, has not lent itself to easy consensus.[1] In the preceding context, Paul discusses the freedom that the Galatians have in Christ (5:1–12) and exhorts them not to use this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh (5:13–15). He then declares in 5:16–17,

> [16] But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. [17] For the flesh desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, so that you do not do whatever you want [ἵνα μὴ ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε ταῦτα ποιῆτε].[2]

1. John M. G. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth: Paul's Ethics in Galatians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988; repr., Vancouver: Regent College, 2005), 112; Jan Lambrecht, "The Right Things You Want to Do: A Note on Galatians 5,17d," *Bib* 79 (1998): 515; Jean-Noël Aletti, "Paul's Exhortations in Gal 5,16–25: From the Apostle's Techniques to His Theology," *Bib* 94 (2013): 395.
2. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of Scripture are my own.

Journal for the Study of Paul and His Letters, Vol. 10, No. 2, 2020, pp. 181–196

https://doi.org/10.5325/jstudpaullett.10.2.0181

Scholarly discussion of Gal 5:17 has centered on two issues: First, does the ἵνα connote purpose or result? Second, what does ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε mean? The present article focuses on the second issue. Here, I outline the various interpretations of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε, examine the exegetical factors that that have led scholars to affirm one view over the others, and offer fresh evidence for interpreting ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as fleshly desires from Paul's use of θέλω with respect to the Galatians elsewhere in the letter. My case does not depend on a particular interpretation of the ἵνα, and so, if successful, it should both establish the meaning of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε and provide further context for determining the precise sense of the ἵνα.

Existing Interpretations

Scholars have interpreted ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε in four distinct ways.[3] First, some have understood this phrase to refer to *both* the desires of the Spirit and the desires of the flesh.[4] From this perspective, the flesh and the Spirit are opposed to each other with the intent (telic ἵνα) or result (ecbatic ἵνα) that believers are caught in a stalemate between the two. Ernest Burton (who takes the ἵνα as telic) perhaps best captures the essence of this view: "Does the man choose evil, the Spirit opposes him; does he choose good, the flesh hinders him."[5] Most proponents of this view understand the ἵνα as telic, but some interpret it as ecbatic.[6] However, even those who take the ἵνα as telic often assume that the intentions of the flesh and the Spirit are carried out to some degree.[7]

3. For a similar list, see Lambrecht, "Right Things," 517–20. These four views seem to exhaust the logical possibilities for how ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε might be interpreted.
4. Friedrich Sieffert, *Der Brief an die Galater*, 8th ed., KEK 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1894), 325; Ernest de Witt Burton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1921; repr., 1975), 302; Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater*, 12th ed., KEK 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 249–50; Albrecht Oepke, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Galater*, 3rd ed., THKNT 9 (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1964), 135–36; Franz Mussner, *Der Galaterbrief*, HThKNT 9 (Freiburg: Herder, 1974), 377–78; Hans Dieter Betz, *A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 280–81; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians*, WBC 41 (Dallas: Word, 1990), 245–46; James D. G. Dunn, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 1993), 299–300.
5. Burton, *Galatians*, 302.
6. E.g., Oepke, *Galater*, 135–36; Betz, *Galatia*, 280.
7. Barclay (*Obeying the Truth*, 113 n. 16) notes this phenomenon with respect to Ellicott, Burton, Schlier, and Mussner. Mussner, who takes the telic view, argues that flesh and the Spirit neutralize each other so thoroughly that the believer is left free to choose good or evil. However, such freedom of the will is precisely what Paul says the Galatians do *not* have, at least on this interpretation of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε (so rightly Betz, *Galatia*, 281 n. 83; Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*,

Second, others have understood ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε to refer to the *good* desires of the Spirit.[8] On this view, the mutual opposition of the flesh and the Spirit has the purpose or result of preventing the believer from obeying the promptings of the Spirit. Interpreters who take this view tend to prefer the ecbatic ἵνα.[9] However, they do not generally argue that the flesh prevents believers from doing any good whatsoever. John Calvin, for example, comments, "Paul . . . declares, that believers, so long as they are in this life, whatever may be the earnestness of their endeavours, do not obtain such a measure of success as to serve God in a perfect manner."[10] Jan Lambrecht softens the effect of the flesh's action even further, arguing that Gal 5:17 is merely a "stern warning" about what would happen to the Galatians if they did not accept the guidance of the Spirit.[11] But the basic position remains the same: the purpose/result of the flesh-Spirit conflict is to prevent the Galatians from doing the good things they want to do.

Third, some interpreters have taken ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε to refer to the *evil* desires of the flesh.[12] Paul, then, would be saying that the flesh and the Spirit are at

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114 n. 17). Dunn (*Galatians*, 299) interestingly rejects Mussner's view but contends that the believer is able to side with the Spirit against him/herself.

8. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, trans. William Pringle, Calvin's Commentaries 21 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 163; Herman N. Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 203–4; J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957; repr., 1971), 210; R. Alan Cole, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed., TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 209; Timothy George, *Galatians*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 387–88; Leon Morris, *Galatians: Paul's Charter of Christian Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 169; J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 33a (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 495; Lambrecht, "Right Things."

9. E.g., Calvin, Ridderbos, Lightfoot, Morris, and Martyn all interpret the ἵνα as ecbatic.

10. Calvin, *Galatians and Ephesians*, 163. Cf. Morris, *Galatians*, 169.

11. Lambrecht, "Right Things," 522–23.

12. John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gal.*, ad loc. (*NPNF*[1] 13:40–41); John Wesley, "Sermon 8, The First Fruits of the Spirit," 1.2–4 in *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 1, ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), 235–36; John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* (London: Epworth, 1950), 696; George S. Duncan, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians*, MNTC (New York: Harper, 1934), 166–68; C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistle to the Galatians with Notes Exegetical and Expository* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1921; repr., 1959), 278–79; Wilber T. Dayton, "Galatians," in *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 357; R. E. Howard, "Galatians," in *Galatians-Philemon*, Beacon Bible Commentary 9 (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill, 1965), 95; Donald Guthrie, *Galatians*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973; repr., 1981) 135–36; G. Walter Hansen, *Galatians*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 171; Ben Witherington III, *Grace in Galatia: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 395; Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians:*

odds, with the purpose or result that the Galatians do not carry out the desires of the flesh. Proponents of this view vary in how they interpret the ἵνα,[13] but the general point is the same: the Spirit empowers the believer to resist fleshly desires.

Fourth, some exegetes have interpreted ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as *neither* the desires of the Spirit nor the desires of the flesh.[14] On this view, the Spirit and the flesh are opposed to each other so that (or in order that) the Galatians cannot simply do whatever they want (i.e., some third thing); they must take a side. Charles Ellicott, for example, takes ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as referring to "the free-will in its ordinary acceptation," as opposed to "the carnal will" or "the moral will."[15] Ronald Fung, who concurs with Ellicott, explains, "The verse then means that in the Spirit-flesh conflict it is impossible for the believer to remain neutral: he either serves the flesh or follows the Spirit."[16] Similarly, John Barclay comments, "The Galatians need have no fear that Paul's talk of 'freedom' and 'following the Spirit' will leave them without moral direction in a structureless existence 'doing whatever they want'. The warfare between flesh and Spirit ensures that this is not the case."[17] Interpreters who take this view generally interpret ἵνα as ecbatic, but this does not seem essential to the view.

The foregoing survey of the existing interpretations of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε demonstrates the complex factors involved in interpreting Gal 5:17. Not only are there four possibilities for how ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε might be interpreted; within each of these views there is diversity as to how the ἵνα might be understood. Interpreters within a given camp can also differ regarding the

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A Commentary, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 354–55; David A. deSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 455–56.

13. For the ἵνα as telic, see Hogg and Vine, *Galatians*, 278–79; Witherington, *Grace*, 395; deSilva, *Galatians*, 456. For the ἵνα as ecbatic, see Guthrie, *Galatians*, 135–36 (though cautiously); Hansen, *Galatians*, 170; de Boer, *Galatians*, 354–55.

14. Charles J. Ellicott, "A Critical and Grammatical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians," in *Ellicott's Commentaries, Critical and Grammatical, on the Epistles of Saint Paul, with Revised Translations* (Minneapolis, MN: James Family, 1978), 131; Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 115; Ronald Y. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 250–51; Frank J. Matera, *Galatians*, SP 9 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 200.

15. Ellicott, "Galatians," 131. Ellicott actually refers to the phrase in question as ἃ ἂν θέλητε, but I have used the normal phrase above for the sake of continuity. Barclay (*Obeying the Truth*, 113 n. 16) interestingly presents Ellicott as taking the first view above (ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as both good and evil desires), but it seems clear from the quote above that Ellicott interprets ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as neither good nor evil desires.

16. Fung, *Galatians*, 251. Cf. Matera, *Galatians*, 200.

17. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 115. Cf. John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 428 n. 18, where Barclay reiterates his earlier view but seems open to interpreting ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as fleshly desires.

extent to which the purpose or result of the ἵνα is realized. We will need to account for this diversity as we weigh the validity of these interpretations below.

Exegetical Factors

The diverse ways in which scholars have interpreted ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε in Gal 5:17 prompt us to ask on what basis the meaning of this phrase is determined. Scholars generally appeal to one or more of five exegetical factors to support their interpretation of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε: (1) the relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:16, (2) the relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:24–26, (3) the relationship between Gal 5:17 and Rom 7:14–25, (4) the equal attention that Paul gives to the Spirit and the flesh earlier in Gal 5:17, and (5) the indefiniteness of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε.[18] Below we will examine each of these factors and evaluate how they should impact the interpretation of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε.

The first factor that scholars use to establish the meaning of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε is the relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:16. In 5:16, Paul commands the Galatians, "Walk by the Spirit, and you will certainly not carry out [οὐ μὴ τελέσητε] the desire of the flesh." Paul here uses the emphatic negative construction (οὐ μή + aorist subjunctive) to express the Spirit's power over and against the flesh.[19]

18. These five do not necessarily exhaust the considerations that might be marshalled to support one interpretation or another, but they are the most significant ones in the history of scholarship and would likely trump any additional factors. One factor that I have not discussed above is the potential parallel between Gal 5:17 and Plato, *Lysis* 207e–208a. See Aletti, "Paul's Exhortations," 404–5, citing Rastoin, *Tarse et Jérusalem*, 234–43, for further commentary on the passage and comparison to Gal 4:1–2. It is also important to note that some factors that scholars use to argue for a particular interpretation are not actually evidence but simply assumptions or possibilities. For example, Aletti asserts that 5:17d connects only to 5:17a and not to 5:17b–c and uses this to argue that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε should be understood as good desires ("Paul's Exhortations," 403, 407–8, citing John J. Kilgallen, "The Strivings of the Flesh . . . [Galatians 5,17]," *Bib* 80 [1999]: 113–14; and Otfried Hofius, "Widerstreit zwischen Fleisch und Geist? Erwägungen zu Gal 5,17," in *Exegetische Studien*, WUNT 223 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008], 161–72 as precedent). Using Aletti's translation, Paul would then be saying, "For the flesh desires against the Spirit . . . to prevent you from doing those (things) you would." However, the only substantiation that Aletti gives for this reading is that the other parts of 5:17–23 deal with either the flesh or the Spirit. This is not a compelling argument, and it could be used just as well to argue the opposite—that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε refers to evil desires.

19. On the emphatic negative, see Herbert W. Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956), §1804; Ernest de Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), §172; BDF, §365; Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament*, vol. 2 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1974), 575; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 468–69. The RSV and

In short, if the Galatians walk by the Spirit, there is absolutely no possibility that they will do what the flesh desires. Verse 17 then explains and substantiates Paul's statement: "For [γάρ] the flesh desires against the Spirit. . ."[20] As numerous interpreters note, Paul's confident statement about the Spirit's efficacy in 5:16 presents a significant problem for understanding ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε in 5:17 as both the desires of the Spirit and the desires of the flesh or as the desires of the Spirit, for on either of these views 5:17 would not explain/substantiate 5:16 but would contradict (or at least substantially mitigate) it.[21]

J. Louis Martyn (who interprets ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as good desires) seems to recognize the difficulty that Gal 5:16 poses for his view when he comments, "Given the promise of v 16, one should have expected quite a different closure to this sentence [5:17]."[22] Barclay, critiquing the view that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε refers to good and evil desires, comments, "Only if the ἵνα clause is taken as an expression of intent alone (i.e. in a purely telic sense) could [the view that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε refers to both good and evil desires] be made to fit the context, but even then we could expect some further statement to show how the Spirit's intent is successful, while the intent of the flesh is not. 5.18 does not seem to fit this requirement."[23] The same could be said of the view that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε refers to good desires. Thus, while one might decrease the tension between these views and 5:16 somewhat by taking the ἵνα as connoting desire alone, the resulting interpretations still remain substantially at odds with Paul's optimism about the Spirit's efficacy in 5:16. To salvage either of these views, one might follow Lambrecht and take 5:17d as merely a hypothetical—what would happen if the Galatians did not accept the Spirit's guidance.[24] However, there are two problems with Lambrecht's thesis. First, he portrays 5:17a–c as "a rather abstract anthropological consideration" in which "Paul forgets the Christian moral choice which the Galatians are supposed to renew" without providing any reason as to why this is so.[25] Barring a compelling argument for this view (which Lambrecht

NRSV translate οὐ μὴ τελέσητε as a strong prohibition ("do not gratify"), but this seems to be a minority view. In addition, Barclay argues that "it is most unlikely that this construction expresses a prohibition. . ., since it is found thus in the NT only in Mt 13.14; Acts 28.26, both citing LXX Is 6.9" (*Obeying the Truth*, 111 n. 10).

20. Hogg and Vine, *Galatians*, 177; Ellicott, "Galatians," 130; Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 111; Hansen, *Galatians*, 170; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 343; Craig S. Keener, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 499.
21. E.g., Duncan, *Galatians*, 166–67; Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 113–14; Matera, *Galatians*, 206–7; Witherington, *Grace*, 394; Keener, *Galatians*, 500–501.
22. Martyn, *Galatians*, 494.
23. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 114.
24. Lambrecht, "Right Things," 522–23.
25. Lambrecht, "Right Things," 523.

does not provide), it seems far better to read 5:17 as a coherent explanation of 5:16. Second, Lambrecht effectively changes Paul's "so that you *do* not do whatever you want" into "so that you *would* not do whatever you want," again without providing any substantiation.

Conversely, the relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:16 favors interpreting ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as evil desires or neither good nor evil desires, for on either of these views 5:17 would function as a natural explanation of 5:16. Since Paul's statement in 5:16 is unambiguous and since 5:17 clearly explains/substantiates 5:16, this consideration constitutes strong exegetical evidence.

A second factor used to establish the meaning of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε is the relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:24–26, where Paul says, "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 keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another." These verses, which conclude the line of thought begun in 5:16–17, present a significant obstacle to understanding ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as both good and evil desires or good desires only. To put it bluntly, it makes little sense for Paul to begin by saying that the Galatians are either caught in a stalemate between flesh and Spirit or are incapable of doing the things of the Spirit only to conclude that believers have crucified the flesh (5:24) and are able to keep in step with the Spirit (5:25–26).[26] Of course, one could attempt to mitigate this problem by taking the ἵνα as purely telic or viewing the purpose or result of the ἵνα clause as unrealized, but the same rejoinders would apply here as with 5:16 above. By contrast, 5:24–26 is quite compatible with interpreting ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as evil desires or neither good nor evil desires. Because 5:24–26 concludes the thought begun in 5:16–17 and is clear in how it construes the believer's relationship to the flesh and the Spirit, it is strong evidence for interpreting 5:17.

A third factor that scholars appeal to is the relationship between Gal 5:17 and Rom 7:14–25, where Paul describes the inability of the "I" to do the good. Many interpreters who take ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε to refer to both good and evil desires or only to good desires cite Rom 7:14–25 in favor of their view. The problem with this comparison, however, is that whereas the Spirit plays a major role in Gal 5:16–26, the Spirit appears nowhere in Rom 7:14–25.[27] Furthermore, Paul is clearly speaking about the Christian life in Gal 5:16–26, but a majority of New Testament scholars today hold that in Rom 7:14–25 Paul is describing a

26. As noted above with respect to 5:16, even if one takes ἵνα in 5:17 as purely telic, a substantial tension remains between the views that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε refers to good desires or both good and evil desires and the optimism of 5:24–26.

27. Douglas J. Moo, *Galatians*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 355; Schreiner, *Galatians*, 344.

non-Christian life.[28] Therefore, while Rom 7:14–25 may be of some relevance to Gal 5:17, it does not seem to constitute primary evidence (i.e., it is far less significant than the relationship between 5:17 and 5:16), and the differences between Gal 5:16–26 and Rom 7:14–25 suggest that we should expect something more of the Spirit-empowered life of Gal 5:16–28 than what Paul predicates of the "I" in Rom 7:14–25.[29] Thus, if anything, the relationship between Gal 5:17 and Rom 7:14–25 would weigh in favor of understanding ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as evil desires or neither good nor evil desires.

A fourth factor that commentators sometimes mention is the equal attention that Paul gives to the Spirit and the flesh earlier in Gal 5:17. Paul's balanced treatment of flesh and Spirit in 5:17a–c is often cited as evidence against the view that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε refers to evil desires, for this would give the Spirit the upper hand over the flesh. Moo, for example, notes that "the major problem" for the fleshly desires interpretation is "why, granted the precisely equal attention that Paul has given to the flesh and the Spirit earlier in the verse, the implied subject of the last clause should be the Spirit."[30] Similarly, Schreiner comments that such an interpretation "diminishes unduly the flesh's role in the verse."[31] The logic of this argument would also weigh against taking ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as good desires (though this point is less often made), and so this factor might be seen as evidence in favor of understanding ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as both good and evil desires or neither good nor evil desires.

That Paul gives equal attention to the flesh and the Spirit in Gal 5:17a–c is undeniable, but I am not convinced that it constitutes grounds for interpreting ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε one way or another, since the broader context might provide a reason for either the flesh or the Spirit to emerge victorious. For example,

28. Craig S. Keener, *The Mind of the Spirit: Paul's Approach to Transformed Thinking* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 58: "The majority of scholars today . . . contend that this section [Rom 7:7–25] cannot refer to the Christian life" (citing extensive bibliography in 58 n. 29). John Barclay also speaks of the "post-Kümmel near-consensus among scholars" that Rom 7:7–25 is "a description (from a believer-viewpoint) of life 'when we were in the flesh' (7:5)" (Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 502 n. 14).

29. Lambrecht ("Right Things," 522) asserts that since in Romans 7 "the preconversion 'I' only wants to do what is good," it stands to reason that the Christian Galatians must want to do what is right. This is an interesting point. However, it seems to me that Lambrecht overreads Paul's rhetoric. While from one perspective Paul can describe the pre-Christian "I" as wanting the good, it is also clear that the "I" is distraught precisely because it is culpable on some level for the evil it is doing. Therefore, while Paul's emphasis in Rom 7:14–25 may fall on the "I" wanting to do the good, it seems that the "I" also wants to do the evil, for how else would the evil be done? Similarly, to preface a point I will make below, it is quite possible that Paul imagines the Galatians as having both good and evil desires but that in 5:17 he is describing their evil desires.

30. Moo, *Galatians*, 356.

31. Schreiner, *Galatians*, 344.

the sentence, "Apollo Creed fought Rocky Balboa, Rocky Balboa fought Apollo Creed; they were opposed to each other, so that Rocky won" might not make much sense in isolation. But it makes complete sense if the preceding sentence is, "Rocky Balboa is a better boxer than Apollo Creed." And, as noted above, in Gal 5:16 Paul gives the reader ample reason for expecting the Spirit to triumph over the flesh at the end of 5:17. Therefore, in my view this factor does not constitute strong evidence for interpreting ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε.

A final consideration is the indefiniteness of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε. Commentators who mention this factor typically present it as evidence against taking ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as good desires or evil desires because these interpretations do not provide the diversity or indeterminacy that the indefinite ἃ ἐάν implies. As a result, this factor is generally seen as evidence in favor of understanding ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as both the desires of the flesh and the Spirit or neither of these. However, such judgments seem to be predicated on the unproven assumption that for Paul good or evil desires are necessarily monolithic. Against this assumption, it is quite feasible that Paul might have conceived of either good or evil desires in a variegated manner (i.e., there are different sorts of good and/or evil desires) that would fit a description such as ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε.[32] Thus, it seems best to conclude that the indefiniteness of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε does not constitute useful evidence for establishing what this phrase refers to.

Therefore, of the five factors that scholars generally use to establish the meaning of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε, the relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:16 and the relationship between 5:17 and 5:24–26 are the only ones that constitute strong and clear evidence for or against any of the available interpretations. The other considerations, at least in the way they have typically been used, all depend on questionable assumptions. Thus, based on the evidence currently available, ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε most likely refers to evil desires or neither good nor evil desires. One might grant a slight edge to the former view because its emphasis on the Spirit's triumph most closely mirrors Paul's optimism in 5:16 and 5:24–26, but on the basis of this evidence alone it is difficult to decide between the two.

32. Indeed, Paul goes on to list "works of the flesh" that might correspond to different sorts of evil desires (Gal 5:19–21) and "fruit of the Spirit" that might correspond to different kinds of good desires (5:22–23). He also refers to the plural "passions [παθήμασιν] and desires [ἐπιθυμίαις]" of the flesh in 5:24. Paul uses both of these terms in the plural elsewhere to describe sinful desires. For παθήμα, see Rom 7:5. For ἐπιθυμία, see Rom 1:24; 6:12; 13:14; Eph 2:3; 4:22; 1 Tim 6:9; 2 Tim 2:22; 3:6; 4:3; Titus 2:12 (here the desires are specifically described as "varied" [ποικίλαις]). The authenticity of Ephesians and the Pastorals is, of course, disputed, but even if Paul did not write these letters, their authors apparently thought that speaking of sinful desires was congruent with Pauline style.

The table below depicts the likelihood of each of these interpretations, with the implied question being, "In light of a given piece of evidence, is this interpretation likely?"

TABLE 1

	Relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:16	*Relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:24–26*
Both	No	No
Good only	No	No
Evil only	**Yes**	**Yes**
Neither	**Yes**	**Yes**

Fresh Evidence

One piece of evidence that has surprisingly not played a significant role in the discussion about ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε is Paul's use of θέλω with respect to the Galatians elsewhere in the letter.[33] However, if we wish to know what Paul thinks the Galatians "want" (ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε), it would seem that other passages in the letter where Paul describes what the Galatians "want" (θέλω) should be of first importance.[34] As it turns out, there are two such passages, both in Galatians 4. In Gal 4:8–9, Paul chides the Galatians:

> [8] But formerly, when you did not know God, you were slaves to those that by nature are not gods. [9] 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 worthless elemental principles [στοιχεῖα], to which you want [θέλετε] to be slaves once again?

Here it is quite clear what the Galatians want: to be enslaved again to the στοιχεῖα that they served when they were pagans (i.e., when they did not know God, 4:8). A few verses on, Paul again describes what the Galatians want: "Tell me, you who want [θέλοντες] to be under the law, do you not listen to the law?" (4:21).

33. I am aware of no publication that discusses this matter.

34. I understand the Galatians to be the subject of θέλητε in Gal 5:17. They are clearly the ones whom Paul addresses in 5:13 (Ὑμεῖς . . . ἀδελφοί; cf. 1:11; 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11; 6:1, 18), and there is no reason to think that Paul shifts to addressing another group (e.g., humanity or Christians in general) in 5:16–26.

Thus, in Gal 4:9 and 4:21 Paul presents the Galatians as wanting (θέλω) two things: (1) to be enslaved to the στοιχεῖα they formerly served as pagans; (2) to be under the law. In the context of Galatians, there can be no doubt that neither of these desires is good or of the Spirit. But how do they relate to the flesh? As John Barclay rightly notes, while Paul employs σάρξ in a variety of ways in Galatians, in general he uses it "to designate *what is merely human*, in contrast to the divine activity displayed on the cross and in the gift of the Spirit."[35] The pagan lives that the Galatians formerly lived would certainly rest on the σάρξ side of Paul's flesh-Spirit dichotomy (cf. the characteristically Gentile vices among the "works of the flesh" in 5:19–21). And, however much it may surprise us, Paul presents the Torah-observant life that the Galatians are at risk of adopting as also residing in the realm of σάρξ.[36] This is perhaps clearest in Gal 3:2–3, where Paul unambiguously associates Jewish "works of the law" with "the flesh": "Did you receive the Spirit from *works of the law* or from hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now finishing by *the flesh*?" Similarly, in 4:21–31 Paul identifies Ishmael, who was born according to the flesh (κατὰ σάρκα, 4:23), with those who are under the law.[37] Against this backdrop, it becomes clear that both the Galatians' desire to serve the στοιχεῖα once again (4:9) and their desire to be under the law (4:21) are ultimately desires of the flesh, for they are merely human and stand in opposition to the new life that God has granted believers in Christ and by the Spirit.[38]

The picture of the Galatians' desires that Paul provides in Gal 4:9 and 4:21 accords remarkably well with the rest of the letter. As is often noted, Paul foregoes his normal thanksgiving at the beginning of the letter and begins with a rebuke: "I am astonished that you are so quickly turning away from the one who called

35. Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 206, emphasis original.

36. Andrew H. Wakefield argues that for Paul "the problem with the law is that it is bound to or is a feature of the old age" (*Where to Live: The Hermeneutical Significance of Paul's Citations from Scripture in Galatians 3:1–14*, AcBib 14 [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003], 190, cf. 189–97).

37. For an extended discussion of Paul's negative assessment of Judaism in Galatians, see Barclay, *Obeying the Truth*, 206–12.

38. Indeed, for the Galatians to place themselves under the law would ultimately be equivalent to enslaving themselves to the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. Note that in 4:3 Paul says that "when we were children, we were enslaved under the elementary principles of the world." The "we" here refers to either Jewish Christians or Christians in general. In either case, Paul implies that to be under the law is to be enslaved to the στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου. See Bradley R. Trick, *Abrahamic Descent, Testamentary Adoption, and the Law in Galatians*, NovTSup 169 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 260–61; deSilva, *Galatians*, 346–53; cf. Wakefield, *Where to Live*, 195–96.

you in the grace of Christ for another gospel" (1:6).[39] This opening salvo, as well as the polemical tone of the letter as whole, suggests that Paul is writing precisely because he is concerned that the Galatians do not want what they should want—to follow the truth of the gospel—but instead desire to embrace another gospel that is according to the flesh. We catch hints of the Galatians' inappropriate desires elsewhere, too—for example, in 3:1: "O foolish Galatians! Who bewitched you?" Thus, the Galatians' fleshly desires are not only evident in 4:9 and 4:21; they constitute Paul's demonstrable reason for writing the letter as a whole.

Let us now bring this data to bear on Gal 5:17. In Gal 4:9 and 4:21, Paul presents the Galatians as wanting (θέλω) (1) to be slaves to the στοιχεῖα of their former pagan lives and (2) to be under the law. Paul also implies throughout the letter that he is writing precisely because the Galatians want the things of the flesh. Therefore, when in 5:17 Paul says that the flesh and the Spirit are opposed to each other "so that you [Galatians] do not do whatever you want [ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε]," he is most likely referring to their fleshly desires. In light of 4:9, 21, and the overall tenor of the letter, it is easy to see how Paul might have expected the Galatians to interpret ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε in this way without the need for further specification. Indeed, for Paul to say something like "whatever *fleshly things* you want" in 5:17 would be beside the point; in the preceding context he has made it quite clear what he thinks the Galatians want.[40] To be clear, I am not arguing that Paul envisions the Galatians as having no good or Spirit-oriented desires; he clearly expects that they do (or at least could), or he would not have bothered writing to them. I am simply arguing that it is the Galatians' fleshly desires that are in view in 4:9, 4:21, and 5:17 and necessitate the letter as a whole.

How does Paul's use of θέλω in Gal 4:9 and 4:21 impact the four interpretations outlined above? In light of this evidence, Option 1 (good and evil desires) is possible, but not likely. While Gal 4:9 and 4:21 can tell us that Paul definitely thinks the Galatians want fleshly things, they cannot cancel out the possibility that in 5:17 Paul also has in mind the desires of the Spirit. On the other hand, 4:9 and 4:21, as well as the general tone of the letter, provide no basis for interpreting ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as both good and evil desires. Option 2 (good desires only) fares less well. Galatians 4:9 and 4:21 make it clear that Paul envisions the Galatians as wanting things of the flesh, and it seems reasonable to think that this assessment impacts 5:17. Option 3 (evil desires only) is highly likely in light of this evidence for the reasons noted above. Finally,

39. For thanksgiving statements in the undisputed Pauline epistles, see 1 Cor 1:4–9; Phil 1:3–11; 1 Thess 1:2–10. In disputed Pauline epistles, see Eph 1:15–23; Col 1:3–14; 2 Thess 1:3–4; 2 Tim 1:3–7.

40. *Pace* Schreiner, *Galatians*, 344.

Option 4 (neither good nor evil desires) seems unlikely for the same reason as Option 2: since Paul presents the Galatians as wanting fleshly things in 4:9 and 4:21, it seems improbable that he would depict their desires as being neutral in 5:17.

If we tabulate Paul's use of θέλω in Gal 4:9 and 4:21 with the two strong pieces of evidence examined above (the relationship between 5:17 and 5:16 and the relationship between 5:17 and 5:24–26), we arrive at the following results:

TABLE 2

	Relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:16	*Relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:24–26*	*Paul's use of θέλω with respect to the Galatians (Gal 4:9, 21)*
Both	No	No	Maybe
Good only	No	No	No
Evil only	**Yes**	**Yes**	**Yes**
Neither	Yes	Yes	No

The evidence introduced here from Gal 4:9 and 4:21 therefore plays an important role, for it tips the scales of likelihood away from ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε being neither good nor evil desires (a popular interpretation in recent scholarship) and toward ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as referring to evil desires.

Let us now place this interpretation of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε within the context of Gal 5:16–17 as a whole. Paul begins by exhorting the Galatians to "walk by the Spirit" and promises that if they do so, they will certainly not do what the flesh desires. He then goes on to explain why this is true: the flesh and the Spirit are diametrically opposed to each other ἵνα μὴ ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε ταῦτα ποιῆτε. As noted above, my interpretation of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε does not depend on a particular reading of the ἵνα. However, in my view the context (both apart from ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε and including it) supports an ecbatic interpretation of the ἵνα. It is odd to speak of the mutual opposition of flesh and Spirit as having a purpose, for purpose seems to imply intent, and conflicts do not generally have intent. One might be able to speak of a conflict having intent if the rival powers cooperated together toward a common end, but that very cooperation would erode the notion of conflict. And in any case, it is clear both in 5:17 and in Pauline theology more broadly that the flesh and the Spirit are not cooperating together; each is striving to defeat the other. But even if one overcomes this difficulty, flesh and Spirit seem to be such powerful Pauline realities that it is hard to imagine how, if both were striving against each other with the intention of keeping the Galatians from doing whatever they wanted, that intention would not be actualized. Alternatively, one might argue it is God's intent that is in view. However, if this

is so, then the ἵνα might as well be ecbatic, for there is no doubt that in Paul's mind God's purposes will be accomplished.

Paul, then, presents the mutual opposition of flesh and Spirit as having the result that "you do not do whatever [fleshly things] you want." But to what degree is this result realized? It is here that we must remember the close relationship between Gal 5:16 and 5:17. In 5:16, Paul sets forth a condition of sorts: if you walk by the Spirit, then you will certainly not do what the flesh desires. Paul then explains in 5:17: the reason that walking by the Spirit safeguards one against carrying out the desire of the flesh is that the flesh and the Spirit are diametrically opposed to each other so that when one walks by the Spirit, one does not do whatever fleshly things one might want. Galatians 5:16–17 should therefore be understood as follows:

> But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will certainly not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh desires against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, so that [when you walk by the Spirit] you do not do whatever [fleshly things] you want.[41]

Such an interpretation has significant implications for how we understand Paul's ethics in Galatians. Galatians 5:16–26 contains Paul's well-known list of the fruit of the Spirit (5:22–23), which he contrasts with the works of the flesh (5:19–21). There is no doubt that Paul is telling the Galatians that they *should* manifest the fruit of the Spirit and deny the works of the flesh, but *can* they do so? And if so, to what degree? Galatians 5:16–17 provides the interpretative frame within which one will inevitably answer this question. If one takes ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as good desires or both good and evil desires, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Paul is telling the Galatians to do something that they are to some degree unable to do. Interpreting ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε as neither good nor evil desires avoids this problem, but here the emphasis falls on the Galatians' need

41. Wakefield (*Where to Live*, 199–204) argues that Paul is exhorting the Galatians to live "*in* the Spirit" (i.e., in the new age) rather than "*by* the Spirit" (i.e., by the Spirit's power or guidance). He even goes so far as to say that "living *in* the Spirit does not empower us to resist sin, nor does it give us a new commandment, nor does it even give us moment by moment guidance for dealing with sin" (202). Wakefield gives the analogy of how the best way to avoid a marital affair is not to make and attempt to follow various rules but to take one's spouse wherever one goes (*Where to Live*, 203). In my view, Wakefield is correct in what he affirms but wrong in what he denies. Paul certainly wants believers to live in the new age, but this does not negate the importance of the Spirit's power and guidance. Paul's description of the Spirit's striving against the flesh implies that the Spirit's power is in view, and his statement "let us also keep in step with the Spirit" suggests that to live πνεύματι does involve certain standards (cf. Paul's phrase "the law of Christ" in Gal 6:2; 1 Cor 9:21).

to take a side—they cannot remain neutral. The view advanced here—that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε refers to fleshly desires—stresses that by the Spirit's power the Galatians are able to deny the evil and do the good. Within this frame, it becomes clear that Paul's ethical aim both in 5:16–26 and elsewhere in Galatians is not only to tell the Galatians what they should do but also what they can do by the power of the Spirit.

The interpretation of Gal 5:16–17 provided here and the resulting view of 5:16–26 also impact how we understand Paul's anthropology. Galatians 5:16–26 arguably constitutes one of Paul's earliest descriptions of the Christian life,[42] and here Paul is quite optimistic about the believer's ability to live a holy life by the power of the Spirit and to deny the flesh. This historical background provides important context for understanding other passages like Rom 7:14–25. Those who advocate that Rom 7:14–25 depicts a Christian life must reckon with the fact that such a view not only stands in tension with Romans 6 and 8 but also requires Paul to directly contradict his earlier exposition of the Christian life in Gal 5:16–26.

Another interesting implication of this interpretation of Gal 5:16–26 is that for Paul one's desires apparently do not determine one's actions or constitute one's identity. The Galatians clearly want the things of the flesh, but Paul tells them that if they walk by the Spirit then they will not carry out those desires, and he presumes throughout that they are still members of God's family even though they have those desires.[43] Desires therefore do not seem to be primary to the believer's behavior or identity. Rather, it is the Spirit's presence that provides the believer with a stable identity and empowers them not to do whatever fleshly things they might want.

Conclusion

This study has examined the exegetical factors that count in determining the meaning of ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε in Gal 5:17 and has presented fresh evidence in favor of interpreting this phrase as referring to fleshly desires. Of the exegetical considerations that scholars often cite to support a given position, the only ones that constitute strong evidence are the relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:16

42. For a survey of proposed dates for Galatians, see Moo, *Galatians*, 9 (citing examples of each view). I regard it as likely that Galatians was written no later than AD 51, which would place it alongside 1 and 2 Thessalonians as one of Paul's earliest letters. Scholars who concur with this dating of Galatians include: Longenecker, *Galatians*, lxxii–lxxxviii; Dunn, *Galatians*, 12–17; Martyn, *Galatians*, 19–20; Witherington, *Galatians*, 8–13; Schreiner, *Galatians*, 22–29; Moo, *Galatians*, 8–18.

43. Paul refers to the Galatians as ἀδελφοί in Gal 1:11; 3:15; 4:12, 28, 31; 5:11, 13; 6:1, 18.

and the relationship between Gal 5:17 and 5:24–25. On the basis of this evidence, ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε most likely refers to evil desires or neither good nor evil desires. However, when we take into consideration Gal 4:9 and 4:21, where Paul describes the Galatians as wanting (θέλω) fleshly things, as well as the overall occasion of the letter, it is clear that ἃ ἐὰν θέλητε is best understood as fleshly desires. Such an interpretation of 5:17 emphasizes the possibility of Paul's ethical exhortations in Galatians and provides important historical context for understanding Paul's view of the Christian life elsewhere in his letters, not least Rom 7:14–25.