Bruce Longenecker’s stated goal in this book is to arrange the components of Paul’s ‘worldview’ as found in the letter to the Galatians (1). Firmly in the center of Longenecker’s interpretation of Galatians and Paul's worldview stands eschatology.1 To Longenecker, 'eschatology' means the obliteration of this world and its replacement by another. Specifically, eschatology has to do with the continuing triumph of God in a cosmos of competing forces; it is “about God's invasion into the order of this world in order to set things aright in a new sphere of existence where God's reputation as the cosmic sovereign is vindicated” (3). The first two chapters of the book set the stage for Longnecker’s interpretation, assessing the current state of scholarly interest in Galatians (Ch. 1) and reconstructing the original context of Paul’s letter (Ch. 2). Next, the book elucidates the eschatological framework of Galatians (Ch. 3). With this in place, the book examines how an eschatological worldview frames Paul’s arguments concerning Christian moral identity (Chs. 4 & 7), the people of Israel (Ch. 5), and the nature of the Law (Ch. 6). The book concludes by offering three observations on how this study should influence the future of Pauline scholarship (Ch. 8).

Chapter 1, “The Triumph of God and Salvation History in Galatians,” contrasts the ‘apocalyptic’ school’s [Beker, Martyn] interpretation of Galatians with that of the ‘salvation-history’ school [Dunn, Wright], pausing briefly to discuss Bultmann’s and Sanders’ differing views of Judaism in Paul’s day. The central disagreement Longenecker emphasizes is whether Paul, in the letter to the Galatians, depicts God’s invasion into the world as continuous or discontinuous with the history of Israel according to these two schools of interpretation. The representatives of the ‘apocalyptic’ interpretation of Galatians agree that God’s invasion of the world is the key to understanding Paul.2 Beker and Martyn also agree that Galatians lacks any real sense of connection between God’s invasion and his covenant with Israel, although they disagree as to why this is so.3 Longenecker writes, “Lacking altogether is a fully-developed view of salvation-history, in which God has been at work in and through his people, leading to a grand eschatological climax with the advent of the Messiah” (11). Thus, Paul focuses on the discontinuous in Galatians as he aims to separate the connection the agitators were making between the Jews and gentiles.4

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1 Although Longenecker fits within the ‘apocalyptic’ school of J.C. Beker and J. Louis Martyn, he prefers using the term ‘eschatological’ rather than ‘apocalyptic’ (See reasoning on pgs. 22-23).
2 Beker and Martyn have different points of emphasis in understanding God’s apocalyptic act – Beker accentuates the worlds future subjugation (παροιμία) with Christ’s coming setting the process of God’s ultimate victory in motion whereas, Martyn focuses on the crucifixion establishment of the new creation.
3 Beker assumes that Paul presupposes a covenant relationship between Israel and God, but this is lost in the letter to the Galatians due to the contingent nature of the letter. Martyn, however, asserts that Paul’s gospel has “no linear pre-history” (11). In Martin’s view, Paul does not connect salvation history with Israel in Galatians because salvation history begins with the coming of God in Christ (12).
4 “The agitators” is how Longenecker translates όι άφροςονισες and thus the term he uses for the Paul’s opponents in Galatia (25). Ch. 2 deals with the agitators in more detail. In addition, Longenecker does not capitalize ‘gentiles’ in this book. My review follows his usage of these terms.
The ‘salvation-history’ school of interpretation understands that Paul does not sever the connection between God’s work in Christ and in the history of Israel. Dunn and Wright, relying on Sanders’ reworking of Paul’s understanding of the Law as covenantal and not legalistic, believe Paul redefines the connection the agitators are making between the Jews and gentiles. In this reading, the traditional Jewish hope that the God of Israel will be recognized as the one true God by all the nations animates both Paul and the agitators. The agitators define Israel according to the covenantal boundary markers (Gal. 3:2 - ἐξ ἔργων νόμου) and are requiring the gentiles to take on these markers. Yet, for Paul, God’s promise to Abraham became realized in Christ and he argues against the identity of the people of God being bound up with the traditional Jewish boundary markers (18). Thus, Paul’s focus in Galatians is on the continuous as he positions the gentiles within the covenant relationship of Israel based on faith, not ethnicity. One of the main objectives of this book, especially Chs. 5 and 6, will be to find a middle ground between the apocalyptic and the salvation historical schools of interpretation in respect to Galatians.

Chapter 2, “The Influence of Agitators in Galatian Christianity,” is a synopsis of the identity of Paul’s opponents in Galatia. At the most basic level, they were Jewish Christians from outside the Galatian community – perhaps connected to the Jerusalem church – who based their message solely on covenantalism and ethnocentricity (25, 33-34). Longenecker underscores three specific attributes that are central to his interpretation of Galatians based on Paul’s more polemical texts. In Gal. 3:1, Paul’s use of ἔξασχειν shows that he visualized the battle in spiritual/cosmic terms. Although Longenecker disagrees with those who try to involve the agitators with magic based on this term, the battle must involve competing spiritual forces (26-27). Furthermore, in Gal. 6:12-13 Paul denigrates their character stating they were driven by selfish concerns and self-serving motives (27-28). Finally, Gal. 4:17 refers to them with the verb ζηλοῦσιν, a verb “frequently cited as the quality or character that motivated famous Jews of Israel’s history to preserve the distinctiveness of Israel’s covenant identity” (27). Paul is pressing their desire to define covenant membership exclusively along national lines and hopes to prove to the Galatians that while circumcision may be the agitators foremost concern, their ultimate desire is to require comprehensive law observance (30-33). Thus, in Paul’s view the agitators promoted a return to slavery and preached a gospel that was no gospel at all (Gal. 1:6-7).

Ch. 3, “The Establishment of the New World,” focuses on the eschatological nature of Paul’s worldview. The opening and closing of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, in Longenecker’s estimation, frame the whole letter in an eschatological manner. In Gal. 1:4 Paul establishes Christ as the one who rescues Christians from the age of evil, and in Gal. 6:15 Christ inaugurates a new creation or “sphere of existence” (45). As Longenecker highlighted in his discussion of the agitators, this is not a battle between the spiritual realm [the new creation] and the humanly

5 Longenecker accepts Sanders’ covenantal understanding of the Law over against Bultmann’s legalistic viewpoint. He writes, “Behind Paul’s strident stand against gentiles being forced to live like Jews (2:14) lies not an infiltration of legalistic works-righteousness but the emergence of a form of covenantalism wherein ethnic identity was promoted as an important component of salvation” (17). In Ch. 6, however, Longenecker argues that from a Christian perspective (i.e. retrospectively) a more comprehensive understanding of the law can be attained, which encompasses both the covenantal and legalistic aspects (134-146).

6 For Dunn “faith in Christ” and for Wright “the faithfulness of Christ.”

realm [the age of evil]. Rather, the battle is between two realms holding to different standards, different rules and different habits each with a spiritual identity. Using primarily Romans 5-8, Longenecker assembles an image of the old world under the power of sin. In this construction, sin is a cosmic power imposing its will upon humanity. He compares it to a structural evil that predetermines the course and possibilities of the lives of those who are under its influence (37-41). By sending Christ into the world, however, God devastated the web of evil established under the power of sin and created a realm where grace reigns (42). Although it is not the formation of a new physical universe, it involves all of creation since it transforms the lives of Christians completely, including their relationships with each other and with creation.

Longenecker also elucidates three characteristics of the new relationship established between God and God’s people based on his readings of Gal. 3:20 and 4:1-10. First, pushing back against the ethnocentric teaching of the agitators, Paul asserts that the one God who alone is worthy of worship must be the God of all people and not just the Jews. Furthermore, since both Gal. 3:20 and 4:1-10 envision that the law is granted exclusively to the Jews it is not relevant to the eschatological age. Thus, “on this side of the eschatological divide” (55) Paul yokes both Jews and gentiles together under the sphere of things that are passing away, thereby discrediting the distinctions [circumcised/uncircumcised; law observant/non-law observant] present in the old world. The new world, however, offers an unmediated relationship with God and only union with Christ incorporates one into the new sphere of existence (66). Longenecker writes, “The Christian becomes incorporated into Christ and the experiences of his ministry, while at the same time the life of the Christian becomes the vehicle through which the living Christ is ‘embodied’ or ‘enfleshed’” (64). Therefore, the new sphere of existence shapes the lives of those under its influence.

Ch. 4, “Eschatological Moral Identity,” asserts that ethical transformation is the corollary to God’s divine triumph. Longenecker writes, “[Ethical transformation] is the mark and the result of God’s invading sovereignty” (74). In Gal. 5:13-6:10, Paul imagines a battle between the powers of the evil age [flesh] and the powers of the new sphere of existence [Spirit]. Nevertheless, the battle is not being fought on some celestial playground, but is playing itself out in the context of earthly morality. Thus, Gal. 5:13-6:10 is not a mere appendix, but a key part of the letter’s singular message: “the transformed identity of the Christian community” (81). In this battle of morals, the flesh is embodied by selfishness and competitiveness (Gal. 5:19-21); however, the spirit is the driving force behind Christian morality and it involves a striking transformation of one’s way of life since the Christian mode of existence consists of participating in Christ’s self-giving (Gal. 5:22-23). Nevertheless, the Spirit’s transforming power does not strip Paul’s gospel of the idea fulfilling the law [i.e. – the Christian’s responsibility to continue working or doing]; rather, it redefines the Christian’s understanding of fulfillment. Longenecker writes, “It is as if Paul is saying to the Galatian Christians: ‘You want the law? Fine with me,

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8 Longenecker describes Paul’s use of “the law” and “στοιχεία” as referring to the Jewish tradition of tribal deities present in Deut. 32:8-9. He writes, “Paul here views the law itself as analogous to the national angels. This seems due to the way that the law regulated the national life of Israel in a fashion comparable to the angelic regulation of the pagan nations” (53).

9 Arranging the battle in these terms causes salvation [union with Christ] to become less about forgiveness of sins and more aligned with deliverance from bondage.

10 Longenecker draws on his previous depiction of the agitators as concrete examples of the morality of the flesh and to emphasize the spiritual nature of their program.
but in fact the law is fulfilled not by observing its commands, as you have been led to believe, but by living cruciform lives of self-giving service’’ (84). In other words, the people of God are still those defined by fulfilling the law because the law comes to its fullest expression in loving service. Thus, not only has Paul redefined law observance, but he has also recharacterized the “the Israel of God” (Gal. 6:16) as those who are in Christ (88).

Ch. 5, “Christ, Israel, and Covenant Theology,” examines Israel’s place in the new eschatological reign of God. Longenecker writes, “It is now pertinent to determine whether there is any sense in which, after such a drastic redefinition of terms, Paul continues to retain a significant place for the ethnic people of Israel” (88). Initially, Longenecker turns to Gal. 3:13-14 and 4:4-5 to offer a revision of the ‘apocalyptic’ school’s rejection of salvation history within Galatians. These two passages, according to Longenecker, locate Christ’s coming within Israel’s historical context. For example, in Gal. 4:4-5 Christ enters the situation of Israel and redeems it, so that salvation might be offered on a universal scale. In this manner, Christ’s eschatological invasion is continuous with the history of Israel because the prerequisite for universal deliverance was the initial transformation of Israel.

Longenecker’s characterization of Paul’s covenant theology has as its central theological presupposition the ever present πίστες χριστοῦ debate. Firmly in the subjective genitive camp, he relies on Rom. 3:25 to corroborate his interpretation. He writes, “Romans 3:25 seems, then, to include an established confessional statement within earliest Jewish Christianity that speaks of the faithfulness of Christ as a central feature in the process of salvation. This then provides the necessary control for understanding the πίστει Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ formulations” (98). Using the subjective reading, Longenecker ascertains several key components of Paul’s covenantal theology. First, Christ’s faithfulness resulted in the establishment of a new sphere of influence and thus Christian faith cannot be separated from the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Consequently, Christ’s faithfulness is the only remedy for humanity’s sinful condition meaning, it cannot be found in ethnic identity or law observance (110). Longenecker writes, “In the faithful ministry of Jesus, Israel’s commission has been fulfilled, as salvation is now available to all through the one who embodies faithfulness acceptable to God” (101). Thus, those in Christ Jesus solely fulfill the law because the Faithful One lives in the believer. Through this interpretation, Longenecker finds that Paul is a covenantal theologian at home with the structures of Judaism, “even though the content that he gives to those structures proved to be enormously untypical” (115 – emphasis in text).

Ch. 6, “The Law, Abraham, and Christ,” surveys Paul’s portrayal of the law in Galatians. Longenecker illustrates Paul’s understanding of the law as revolutionizing the traditional Jewish understanding of the law in two ways: it is only a temporary guardian, not eternal and built into the very structures of the world; and it is unable to give life and not the primary source of life. In each of the respective cases, Paul comprehends that Christ has replaced the law. First, Christ

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11 Not all in the subjective camp agree that Rom. 3:25 contains a pre-existing confessional statement. Dr. Campbell, for one, disagrees with this assertion. See The Rhetoric of Righteousness in Romans 3.21-26 The Deliverance of God (632-638).

12 “Sin,” or “sinner,” is defined as all flesh apart from Jesus Christ. The argument is based on dominion, not individual action.

13 Paul assumes the fundamental problem is humanity’s inability to keep the law, and because the law is unable to transform the condition of humanity, it cannot bring life (121-122).
is the embodiment of God’s wisdom assuming all the attributes the Jews traditionally associated with the Torah. Second, Christ’s faithfulness opened the way for transforming believers and became the only source of life. Longenecker goes on to demonstrate how this understanding of the law influences the interpretation of Paul’s use of Abraham and the curse language of Gal. 3:10-14. In relation to Abraham, it is not Abraham’s faithfulness to the law that “was recognized as being for him righteousness” (129), but his faith. Faith therefore marks outs his descendents as those joined to the single seed of Abraham through Christ’s faithfulness (Gal. 3:16) and in Christ, they become Abraham’s collective descendents (Gal. 3:26-28). Thus, Longenecker writes, “The one constant in Paul’s pronouncements on the purpose of the law is this: the law is not to have regulatory force in determining the identity of those in Christ” (128).

Ch. 7, “Eschatological Transformation Embodied,” revisits the subject of moral identity discussed in Ch. 4. Longenecker maintains that “the success of Paul’s case in Galatians depends upon the connection that he establishes between (1) one’s pattern of life and (2) the suprahuman powers with which one is inevitably aligned” (157). He illustrates how Paul’s depictions of himself, the agitators, and the Galatians are meant to reinforce the central argument. Paul’s ministry and gospel emanate from Christ’s indwelling (Gal. 2:19-20). A different power, however, animates the agitators resulting in selfishness. The Galatians, on the other hand, by accepting Paul despite his ailments (Gal. 4:12-20) displayed Christian behavior from the beginning. This is evidence that the Spirit initiated their transformation because their actions were the embodiment of Jesus Christ’s self-giving. The chapter ends with a discussion of relationship between Christian character and scripture interpretation. Longenecker deduces that for Paul, right interpretation emerges when the Spirit continuously nurtures one’s character. Thus, Paul’s central argument in Galatians is moral but also theological because the spirit with which one is aligned determines one’s pattern of life, including the ability to interpret scripture.

Ch. 8, “Concluding Observation,” presents three ways this study should influence study of Galatians and Pauline theology. First, the God of eschatological triumph is the covenant God of Israel. Neither the ‘apocalyptic’ school nor the ‘salvation-history’ school of interpretation can continue to exclude the other from their interpretations. Second, the Lutheran perspective on the law and NPP’s vision of the law are not mutually exclusive. According to Longenecker, Paul believes that an ethnocentric worldview must lead to legalism and so the two views are able to compliment each other. Moreover, Paul’s letter to the Galatians contains evidence of both and it is unfaithful to ignore one because of certain presuppositions. Third, the coherence of Paul’s thought is perhaps best found in Paul’s social agenda of fostering “a cruciform ethos and practice within his communities” (187). Paul’s desire to nurture transformed Christian identity is able to unite the Pauline corpus “in a way that no doctrine or motif does” (187-188).

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14 Longenecker again is verifying the theological importance of the subjective reading of πίστις χριστου.
15 For further discussion on Longenecker’s interpretation of Gal. 3:10-14 see questions at the end of the review.
16 Longenecker does not clearly define what he means by “faith” in this context.
17 Longenecker relies on the evil eye phenomenon widespread in Greco-Roman culture to connect the agitators to malevolent spiritual forces (150-155).
18 He does note, however, that they are found most clearly from a retrospective viewpoint. Longenecker writes, “Either way, it seems that, chronologically speaking, in Paul’s theology the solution preceded the plight” (183).
For Discussion:

1. The section of the review on Ch. 2 situates Longenecker within the broader field of Pauline theology.

2. Text to discuss: Gal. 3:10-14. Longenecker writes, “In Gal 3:10 Paul is out-smarting the agitators, returning their serve while adding his own theological spin to the passage. Unfortunately, it is not wholly clear what that spin is since, peculiarly, Paul seems to have assumed an important theological point which he does not explicitly explain.” Longenecker presents four views of Paul’s assumed premise:

   A. Dunn – “Paul assumes that the scriptural command ‘to do law’ refers in fact to Christian faith or to the fulfillment of the law in Christ; accordingly, those who are cursed are those who literally keep the stipulations of the law” (136).

   B. Wright – Paul is “building his case on a common Jewish theology of an extended exile of the Jewish people” (137). Thus, Israel remains under the curse described in Deut. 27-30, and those who join her in ‘doing the law’ join in that curse.

   C. Sanders – Paul has no premise at all. He only quotes Deut. 27:26 because it contains both the words “curse” and “law”. Thus, the passage actually makes no sense.

   D. Traditional View – “Paul is thought to have assumed that no one could fulfill the law perfectly, so that all are under the curse” (139). Longenecker accepts this view.

I was interested in discussing how to make sense of this passage and what Paul is assuming. Is one of these four the best option, or are there other ways of understanding Paul’s intent?

3. At least since Sanders, the NPP has attempted to rehabilitate the image of Jews/Judaism as a religion not constructed on legalism. Yet, the central charge against the Jews is now ethnocentrism (18), which seems to me to be saying that the Jews’ main problem is/was that they are essentially racist. Longenecker takes it even a step further and casts the Jews as ethnocentric legalists. Is this really a step forward in Jewish-Christian relations?

4. Are the apocalyptic view and the historical-salvation view able to be connected in the way Longenecker attempts?