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From Freedom to Spirit-Led Community: A Contextual Exegesis of Galatians 5:13–17 in the Digital Age

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Abstract

In this study, Galatians 5:13-17 is exegeted to explore the motif of Christian ethics in the digital age, as it relates to the freedom that is preached in the Galatian church. The article applies a qualitative textual analysis and integrative synthesis of studies to interpret the concepts of freedom, flesh, love, mutual service and walking by the Spirit in Paul's response to conflict in the Galatian communities. It asserts that Christian freedom is not self-centred, but an instrument for the promotion of neighbours' good. Freedom in this context is not like that which is given by an individual, but it is rather freedom by the Spirit. In his cautionary exhortation against the use of freedom as an opportunity for the gratification of the flesh, Paul implicates digital culture that has become weapons of public injury, domination and narcissism. His imagery of biting and devouring shines a light on cyberbullying, toxic communication, and digitally amplified conflict. It suggests that Spirit-led digital ethics promotes relational freedom, neighbour-love, truthful communication, self-control, human dignity, accountability and communal formation.

Keywords: Galatians 5:13-17, Christian liberty, Spirit-led, Digital Ethics, Human Relationship.

Introduction

Digital media have transformed how individuals construct an identity, foster relationships, exercise religious practices, dissent, and ask for recognition. These environments provide real benefits: there is speedy communication, access to information, public participation and new forms of community. Digital culture, however, also re-organises attention and relations. Among its main cultural tendencies are "individualisation" and "transparency" (Levin and Mamlok 2021); digital society is a change in social as well as technological life (Dufva and Dufva 2019). The person online is thus not operating a "neutral tool. The self-presentation, judgement and belonging habits are shaped by platform structures, visibility metrics, and continuity of connectivity.

This change engenders a moral dilemma. Social media can be a good tool to enhance relationships, but can also make other people audiences, rivals, data or sources of validation. Empirical research has linked specific social media usage to narcissism and vulnerable self-focus, comparison, and empathy deficits, though it is far from conclusive and uniform, and social media users cannot all be considered narcissistic (Alloway et al., 2014; Andreassen et al., 2016; Fegan & Bland, 2021). Digital individualism then is not individuality but self-expression, preference and visibility over mutual responsibility. Its relational impacts are hostility, superficial relationships, emotional distancing and freedom as being an excuse to be unaccountable.

Galatians 5:13-17 offers a fruitful theological prism to view this issue. Paul speaks to the communities who are split due to identity, law and belonging issues. But he has won the

freedom of Christ, and he promptly turns over freedom to the flesh to be used for the service of each other by love. He then cautions that the communities that “bite and devour” each other run the risk of destroying each other, and then commands the believers to walk by the Spirit. Thus, the passage connects freedom, desire and spirituality with the quality of relationships in the community. But the opposition between law and love in Galatians is not such that it can be reduced, as Winter (2019) demonstrates, but rather that the freedom is revealed in the working of faith within love. Cornelius (2015) similarly reads Galatians 5 as an account of publicly and practically living out a spiritually mature life.

Dwelling on the existence of previous research on the topic, discussed in the context of Pauline freedom, spirit-filled living, digital ethics, online identity in relation to narcissism, Christian education and relational harm; it appears the dialogues are more or less disjointed. The challenge is to understand these in context, and to make no improper anachronistic assumption that Paul was dealing with social media when he penned Galatians 5:13–17. This study argues that Paul redefines freedom as a relational vocation – freedom from domination is freedom for loving service under the direction of the Spirit. Dialogic with digital culture, the text is a critique of self-curated autonomy, toxic communication and relational consumption, and an affirmation of truthful, dignifying and accountable forms of online community. This is done by contextual exegesis and the introduction of the concept of a Spirit-Led Relational Digital Ethics approach.

The focus is on Paul's notions of calling, flesh, neighbour-love, mutual service and walking by the Spirit, an appraisal of the impact of the new individualism of the digital media on identity and relationships and the development of ethical guidelines for Christian use of the digital media.

A Data-driven Process for Developing a Method and Interpretive Framework.

The study follows a qualitative and a contextual-exegetical design. It was based on Galatians 5:13–17, the main text, but set against the background of the argument which began with Galatians 5:1 and culminated in Galatians 6:10. It first explores the literary movement and key theological concepts in the study of the passage. It then holds the resulting claims up to critical discussion of research on digital culture and digital ethics as well as identity, narcissism and human relationships. There is a need for continuity and restraint in doing contextual exegesis. Paul did not provide a theory of platforms, algorithms or online identity, nor is the social world of the Galatian assemblies the digital world. The application thus is of a comparative type. It questions how Paul's description of a misdirected freedom and how it relates to conflict and Spirit-led behaviour offers insight into patterns of behaviour that emerge in the digital world. This is also an anti-technological determinist approach. Digital technology influences choice and habits, but does not produce the desires that Paul calls fleshly. In a similar vein, D'Cruz et al. (2022) point out that technological change needs to be rethought in terms of business ethics and less in terms of techno-innovation as an ethically given. Reyman and Sparby (2019) also find digital ethics in the topics of identity, action and responsibility in technologically mediated environments.

The exegesis is supported by a relational ethical approach. Not just the individual intention, but also the consequences of human actions are evaluated, including the impact on neighbours, communities and vulnerable persons. This focus aligns with the current theological narratives about dignity in the digital world and social communication (Sánchez-Camacho, 2022; Umbrello & O'Hara, 2025). It is also a reflection of the multiple instances of

the use of reciprocal language in the letters of Paul: believers must serve “one another,” do not “devour one another,” and live in a field formed by flesh or by Spirit.

Nation, Race, and the Identity of Galatians

Galatians is written in a conflict over the identity and obligation of Gentile believers. Paul argues that their status in Christ is unaffected by their lack of circumcision, yet he does not argue that the Law's demands are rendered void by their lack of circumcision. Vassiliadis (2017) points out that freedom in Christ is a characteristic of the apostolic message of Paul. However, the liberty extolled in Galatians 5:1 is “qualified” in Galatians 5:13. Freedom originates from a source, has a purpose and a social form. It is born out of divine call, it is defended against the flesh, and it is done in loving service.

Paul's argument is eschatological as well. Kwon (2019) highlights the focus of Galatians on future, eschatological inheritance and the Kingdom of God, the Spirit being a decisive sign of the community's future. Thus, ethicizing is not optional to being saved. It shows the direction of a people who are in “the between time” of divine promise and fulfilment. “Walking” by the Spirit is a way of life not simply a fleeting emotion.

Immediate context is a relationship-laden context. Already in Galatians 5:6 Paul has explained that faith works by way and through love. He mentions the fruits of the flesh after 5:13-17, which include enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, rivalries, dissension and factions. They are not just personal addictions. They destroy communities. In this regard, Kaminski (2021) notes the relational suffering and the call into question of belonging that was part of Paul's ministry, and he reminds the reader that Paul's experience need not be viewed as conflict-free. This is relevant to Galatians 5 in that the flesh–Spirit opposition involves how communities deal with difference, power and identity.

Call to Freedom rather than a Self-centred Autonomy: Galatians 5:13

Paul states, “For you were called to freedom.” Freedom is not produced by the self, but is given by calling. The passive form makes the initiative an external one and reinforces the fact that freedom does not imply freedom from responsibility and doesn't imply self-ownership without responsibility. Theologically, the believer is a part of a new order in Christ. Ethically, there is responsibility that accompanies the belonging. Ofili (2021) asserts that freedom “ἐλευθερία” is based on Love “ἀγάπη”, hence an indispensable condition of salvation and fellowship for all Christians with their fellows.

Paul puts on a prohibition: “freedom must not become an opportunity for the flesh.” The word that was translated “opportunity” indicates a starting place or base of operations. Freedom can be diverted and is a tool for self-serving. The flesh in this passage shouldn't be equated with the body or sexuality. In the broader context of Galatians 5:19-21, flesh denotes an attitude which includes desire, domination, rivalry, anger and factions. It's the self bent for its own ends and ready to exploit others as a means.

A modern parallel is digital individualism. Online freedom is said to include unlimited freedom of publishing, reaction, exposure, ridicule, and withdrawal. However, the technical right to use a platform does not confer moral right to use it. The ability to publish a private image, the ability to repeat an allegation or attack an opponent, does not address the question as to whether it is good for truth and neighbourliness. Research on digital culture demonstrates that online spaces can be used to reinforce individualisation, self-measurement and public performance (Arya, 2024; Levin & Mamlok, 2021). Coombs-Hoar (2025) and

Spravtseva (2025) also establish links between the cultures of social media and digitally mediated narcissistic self-presentation and psychological vulnerability.

Paul's other alternative is a paradox: "through love serve one another." The word that is translated "serve" is reminiscent of slavery. Christian freedom does not mean the lifting of all restrictions, but freedom from bad masters to enable the believer to take responsibility for others. There is not a simple opposition between law and love in Galatians as Winter (2019) argues in this article. The new creation is lived in faith through love; freedom takes the form of service to each other. This is a turnaround from digital individualism. No longer an audience for oneself, not an object of anger, not an object to be consumed, but a neighbour who calls into question one's freedom by virtue of his or her good.

Galatians 5:14: Love is the Fulfilment of the LAW

Paul backs up the call to service with Leviticus 19:18: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself. All the law is summed up in this command, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself. Fulfilment is not sentimental nor does it imply a lack of moral judgment. Love is a pragmatic attitude to the good of the neighbour. It does not allow for self-assertion since the self is no longer the sole moral centre.

The digital neighbour can be located far away, not known or even disagree. Distance is no excuse for lack of dignity. Digital ethics, in the context of misinformation, digital violence and strained relationships, has to maintain the person's intrinsic value, as Umbrello and O'Hara (2025) contend. Ngesthi et al. (2023) also link theological ethics and humanistic values to responsible digital culture, harmony and respect. Paul's love for his neighbour thus calls into question practices that disembodied actions. Viral distribution of private pain by screens can include doxxing and embarrassing screen copies, but it impacts real people and communities.

Love is also a key measure of digital religious expression. The internet is a new agora of Christian witness (Galang & Macaraan, 2021). The criterion of such witness cannot be limited to reach, views, or doctrinal declaration. It also has to be evaluated on whether or not its form reflects the message it proclaims. There is no love in a Christian post that attracts attention by contempt, manipulation or public cruelty, and it is antithetical to Paul's "freedom through love.

Biting, Devouring, Digital Conflict - Galatians 5:15

Galatians 5:15 suddenly switches from a liturgy of service to an explicit liturgy of tearing into the flesh of others, consuming them, devouring them: "If you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another." The storyline is one that indicates conflict becoming more intense. Biting wounds; devouring strives to bring down the community; a community cannot live through self-eating. Paul doesn't single out one blameless party and one guilty party. Mutual hostility turns into a system in which all are deformed.

The verse is really similar to how we communicate in ways that are toxic online. In the study Zalukhu (2025) found that cyberbullying, hate speech and cancel culture are the main threats of relationships and mental health. Maltby et al. (2024), also with the lens of school leaders, identified bullying, social comparison and emotional harm to young people as issues. Damayanti et al. (2025) demonstrate how digital literacy is needed for religious content which is controversial and not subject to impulsive escalation. How platforms operate and

how they are visible can turn discontent into mass punishment, particularly by rewarding users for anger.

Paul's warning is not an argument for not disagreeing. Galatians is an assertive and disputed letter. Does disagreement strive for truth and restoration, or contribute to humiliation? Ondang and Ondang (2024) highlight the importance of truth-building in digital communication; Rahmelia and Apandie (2023) find a link between Christian formation and civic virtue and digital responsibility. These views can help make a differentiation between accountable criticism and fleshly aggression. Criticism calls out wrong, puts forward reasons, and is subject to answer to truth. Devouring de-personalises persons in terms of offences, conjures up a crowd and destruction as justice.

Galatians 5:16–17 and the Walking by the Spirit and the Conflict of Desire

The positive command that Paul gives is to walk by the Spirit. Walking is a continuous, common and useful action. It is about patterns and not individual acts. Cornelius (2015) sees Galatians 5:16-26 as a description of a spiritually mature life with implications for the family, work and society. Spirit-led life is not just shared by posting religious material done digitally. It can be seen in the response to being challenged, dealing with another's information, seeking approval and exercising technological power.

Paul assures us that if we "walk in the Spirit, we will not do the things the flesh desires. This is not to say that there is no desire. Continuing opposition between flesh and Spirit – verse 17. The moral subject is not the autonomous and rational chooser, who is "above" influence. Human agency is challenging and is constituted by repetition. This fight can be exacerbated when intensified by digital platforms where reaction is immediate, comparison is continuous, and affirmation is measurable. Hence, it is better to opt for digital intentionality and disciplined resistance, as opposed to unreflective participation, as suggested by Gomes (2021). Christian self-control involves the ability not to react instantly, not to post shaky information and not to publish everything.

The battle of the flesh–Spirit is also a battle of the community. What ensues is the fruit of the flesh, which includes relational disorders, and the fruit of the Spirit, which includes love, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Similarly, Sari and Bermuli (2021) and Ibrani (2025) see the need to form Christians ethically to face the pressure of their moral lives in the digital world. It is their educational emphasis that is important, as Spirit-led conduct cannot be reduced to private willpower. Habits are created through teaching, worship, and accountability and communities that reward truthfulness, not visibility.

Paul's formula does not contain two mistakes. Firstly, it does not fall victim to technological determinism. Desire can be amplified by platforms, but it is morally up to the user and/or institution. Second, it does not allow for a moralistic individualism. Give individual users a pep talk, and you'll find the problem is not solved. The community, church, school and platforms contribute to the shaping of users' desires, what is considered normal behaviour. Personal discipline and communal formation, thus, are part of walking by the Spirit.

The Digital Individualism and the Fragmentation of Relationships

Digital individualism is born from the substitution of personal expression and the creation of self over mutual obligation. It is underwritten by platform cultures of user curation of

identities, attention and performance measurement. Hidayat et al. (2024) point to the influence of social media on students' narcissistic behaviour, and Manchón and Badajoz Dávila (2022) use the metaphor of a “two-way mirror” to refer to the way young people present themselves and judge themselves by means of social media. According to Fegan and Bland (2021), vulnerable narcissism can include the following characteristics: oversensitivity and egocentricity. These findings warn against considering narcissism as self-confidence per se. There can be digital self-obsessiveness while at the same time being insecure, afraid of rejection, and needing approval.

Previous research also shows that the relationship between social media and empathy/self-esteem is complicated. Alloway et al. (2014) showed a correlation between the use of social media and empathy and narcissistic traits, and Errasti et al. (2017) correlated emotional uses of Facebook and Twitter with empathy, narcissism and self-esteem in adolescents. Based on a large national survey, Andreassen et al. (2016) linked addictive use of social media with narcissism and self-esteem. Such studies do not demonstrate that platforms necessarily lead to narcissism. They do demonstrate that specific motivations and usage patterns are important. Paul's descriptions of desire are thus analytically valuable: it is not just a question of whether technology is used or not, but one of what desire makes use of it.

Damage to relationships is evident when presence is replaced by connection. According to K.C. (2024), social media can have positive effects as it can enhance communication and self-expression, but it can also have negative effects, which include anxiety, shallowness, and unstable self-perception. Ogidiolu and Aderounmu (2025) revealed that excessive use of the digital space was a factor in emotional disconnection and sex-related conflict in marriages in Nigeria and suggested that digital literacy and counselling could help address these challenges. This evidence makes Galatians more than just “a hot topic of public discussion.” In close relationships, freedom can turn into an opportunity for the flesh by means of devices that offer opportunity for secrecy, comparisons, avoidance or competing attachments.

Young people's socialisation and self-actualisation also have been influenced by digital culture. As demonstrated by Dunas and Vartanov (2020), Generation Z is a generation that looks for approval, affection and cultural belonging in digital media. This does not mean that these needs are selfish. Attaining this belonging through exclusion, imitation or consumption of others leads them to become ethically twisted. Paul's mutual service provides yet another view of identity: not obliteration, but a construction of the self as a result of accountable involvement in a community.

Ambivalence of Digital Culture

A critical Christian ethic cannot just be a description of digital culture in terms of its decline. Pera et al. (2020) identified that the photo-sharing of older adults could help to increase their self-reflection, wellbeing and social connections, but that there could be conflicts between self-reflection and social relationships. Reade (2020) demonstrates that the strategies of authenticity may foster a sense of digital intimacy and open dialogue on mental health and body image on Instagram. Galang and Macaraan (2021) also pinpoints ways for evangelization, participation and connection.

This ambivalence is crucial to discern Galatians. Paul is not against freedom, he's against the misuse of freedom. Likewise, it is not to shun digital agency but to steer it in the direction of love. Sánchez-Camacho (2022) proposes the media engagement in a social vision related to truth, communion and human development. Ngesthi et al., (2023) stress on the importance of

collaboration, literacy and shared cultural values. These approaches go against the notion of an offline-good, online-bad dichotomy.

However, there are structural issues that don't go away with positive possibilities. Digital environments are commercially organised and attention is an economic value. According to D'Cruz et al (2022), technological megatrends change the face of how things are done in institutions as well as ethics. So it's systems where users are rewarded for frequency, emotionality and personal disclosure. Ethics must take into account character and design, led by the Spirit. While the user is expected to be restrained, institutions should also take into account the ways in which their systems are conducive to hostility, addiction or exploitation.

A Spirit-Led Digital Ethics Framework

Relational Freedom

Digital freedom is not freedom from responsibility but freedom to act responsibly. The user should think about the action and consider the impact on the dignity of the neighbour and wellbeing of the community before they post, share or respond. This principle is directly related to Paul's journey from calling to service. It does not take censorship as a default mode and it does not take the freedom of expression as a cover for not taking responsibility for foreseeable harm.

Unselfish Love and Helpfulness for one's Neighbours.

Love is an integral moral issue in regard to the other person's good. In digital practice, service means providing valuable information, instructing/or correcting respectfully, maintaining privacy and helping vulnerable users, and withholding from entertaining someone at their expense. Zalukhu (2025) says that love, empathy, forgiveness, and self-control are tools to help counter toxic behaviours. Relational fruit should therefore be used as a measure of Christian digital engagement—along with visibility or ideological victory.

Being Responsible and Honest in the Digital World.

Truth is bigger than just information about facts. It encompasses motive and fair representation, context. Damayanti et al. (2025) emphasise the role of literacy in the presence of controversial religious content that is spread online. A Spirit-led user can check for information, to differentiate between allegations and evidence, to avoid deceptive editing and to correct false assertions that have been made by others. Ondang and Ondang (2024) agree and argue that cultures of truth should be fostered alongside (or perhaps before) punishing and addressing the spread of falsehood.

Self-Control in the Digital World.

Self-control puts an end to impulsive involvement. Gomes (2021) suggests the need for intentionality and resistance in using technology as Christians. This can involve a time limit on how often you should be able to respond, a time limit for your offline time, a limit on where you can see the notifications and a refusal to sell out everything you do in private. Self-control is not isolation; it is the ability to choose to engage, not to be dictated by rage, comparison or popularity.

Human Dignity

Each digital representation is about an individual whose value is greater than what's depicted. Responses to misinformation, violence and relational erosion should be centred on dignity, as outlined by Umbrello and O'Hara (2025). This principle means that no one can be labelled without being dehumanized, and it means that no person is to be sexually exploited, exposed or reduced to political or religious categories without their consent. It should not be overlooked that those with low digital literacy or power should also be taken into consideration.

Accountability and Restorative Practice in the Schools.

There may be a need to apologise and/or make restitution, as digital actions have real consequences. Accountability involves taking that correction, removing harmful content, correcting misinformation and repairing relationships where they are broken – if at all possible. Rahmelia and Apandie (2023) link digital ethics with civic virtue, and Ibrani (2025) emphasises moral formation. Therefore, accountability should be developed proactively, rather than reactively and ad hoc, in response to a public scandal.

Communal Formation

Paul speaks to a community, rather than to solitary moral consumers. Digital Discipleship should be taught in churches and Christian institutions, expectations set for online leaders and processes in place to deal with online abuse. The role of Christian education in character formation is shown by Sari and Bermuli (2021), and the presence of digital religion as an apostleship is shown by Galang and Macaraan (2021). However, critical literacy, emotional maturity and offline caring practices are important subjects for inclusion in formation. Otherwise, digital ministry can be what amounts to a rehash of celebrity culture and a replication of one-way communication instead of Spirit-filled community.

Implications for Human Relationships and Christian Communities

In families and marriages, relational freedom needs to be given protected attention, the truthful communication and agreed boundaries around privacy, sexual content and use of devices. From the results of Ogidiolu and Aderounmu (2025), it can be inferred that digital habits can be a source of emotional and sexual conflict. It is therefore important that churches view digital practice as a pastoral care topic and not as an issue of youth as a second-class citizen. Galatians 5:15 is a clear warning against factionalism in the online world, in public and ecclesial debates. Those who seek to recruit followers with Christian rhetoric and persuade them to make attacks on critics may well get attention for the group, but at the sacrifice of the community's moral stature. Toxic behaviours have an impact on wellbeing and social relationships, as shown by Zalukhu (2025) and Maltby et al. (2024). Leadership and accountability should be applied to posts, private groups, forwarded messages and behaviour of organised supporters.

Christian education for youth should include training in theology and in literacy. Rahmelia and Apandie (2023) and Sari and Bermuli (2021) both emphasise moral or civic education in digital environments, while Ibrani (2025) focuses on civic education. It should teach against misinformation, consent, cyberbullying and pornography, and the commercial logic of attention, and of identity performance. It should also acknowledge and learn about digital creativity and community building and not simply about fear. In terms of platform and institutional ethics, it can be assumed that responsibility is shared. Designers, churches, schools and regulators shape environments that influence choices, which are the responsibility of the users. Digital ethics should thus involve clear moderation, protection of the vulnerable user and systems which don't helpfully reward humiliation in the guise of participation.

Discussion and Limitations

This study's key contribution is that Galatians 5:13–17 is a relational account of freedom that is relevant to digital ethics. It goes beyond simply a body/spirit dichotomy and identifies the flesh in self-serving behaviours that hurt communities. It also goes beyond a rule-based conception of digital ethics to enquire: What kind of persons and relationships are created by digital practices? However, there are some limitations. The theory of technology, privacy, artificial intelligence, and platform governance that is offered in this passage is not

comprehensive. It is analogical and has to be backed up with technical and legal know-how. The population of the digital studies in the corpus varies as well as their method and cultural context. However, the links between narcissism and social media cannot be generalised to represent cause and effect. The patterns identified by Hidayat et al. (2024), Fegan and Bland (2021) and Manchón and Badajoz Dávila (2022) have to be interpreted with care and not morals told upon users.

The framework also needs to not spiritualize the structures' issues. There is no replacement for accountability on a platform, digital rights or protection from abuse with personal fruit of the Spirit. On the other hand, love, patience and self-control cannot be obtained by regulation. There is a need for a connection of formed character, responsible communities and just technological arrangements to be sustainable digital ethics.

Conclusion

Galatians 5:13-17 provides a definition of freedom which directly challenges digital individualism. Through God's calling, freedom is given, which is guarded by the flesh and led to loving service. The neighbour is not an 'audience', a 'commodity' or an 'enemy' to be consumed. The injunction to not bite and devour reveals the communal destruction that is generated by toxic speech; through online shaming and factionalism, which was amplified. Walking by the Spirit is an alternative way of living which is disciplined desire, truthful communication, human dignity and mutual responsibility. Digital culture continues to be morally ambiguous. Both intimacy and belonging can be developed through it, as can education and Christian witness; but so can self-curation and outrage and withdrawal in relation. The Spirit-led relational Digital Ethics that is proposed to deal with this ambivalence is rooted in the concepts of relational freedom, neighbour-love, truth, self-control, dignity, accountability and communal formation. So, the point of Paul's argument is not that it provides technical guidelines for social networks. It serves as a theological explanation for the nature of freedom, and the community in which digital power is to be exercised. Walking in the Spirit is being liberated to serve, disciplined to listen and accountable to preserve the humanity of others in a day and age of individualism.

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