EXPLORING
THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE
GALATIANS

with
Pastor Ritva H. Williams

Introductory Matters: Galatians 1:1-5
The author of this letter identifies himself as “Paul.” In his letter to the Philippians he describes himself as circumcised male, an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews, a zealous Pharisee who persecuted the church (3:5-6). Luke tells us that Paul’s Hebrew name was Saul and that he became a follower of Christ after experiencing a dramatic revelation in which Christ called him to take the Gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-31; 22:1-21; 26:2-3). Saul was introduced to the apostles in Jerusalem by Barnabas with whom he later worked to build up the church in Antioch, Syria (Acts 9:26-30; 11:26). Barnabas and Saul were commissioned and sent by the church in Antioch to Galatia (Acts 13-14). That first missionary journey from 46-48 CE was a journey of about 1400 miles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Saul’s Pre-Conversion Beliefs and Practices</th>
<th>Paul’s Post-Conversion Beliefs and Practices</th>
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<tr>
<td>Strict monotheism — YHWH is the origin of all that exists. Wisdom/Spirit = agent of creation</td>
<td>Strict monotheism — YHWH is the origin of all that exists. Christ Jesus is God’s wisdom, the Lord, through whom all things were created (1 Corinthians 1:24, 8:6)</td>
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<td>Israel is the chosen people of this one true God.</td>
<td>Israel will always be God’s chosen people. Gentiles “in Christ” are grafted onto the root of Israel (Romans 9-11).</td>
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<td>The destiny of the world: God will be revealed as ruler of the world, defeat evil &amp; rescue God’s people from oppression by foreigners (Romans) &amp; collaborators (Sadducees &amp; Herodians). God will create a new state of affairs — the kingdom of God — here on earth characterized by justice &amp; peace &amp; raising to life all the righteous dead who longed for the Day of the Lord.</td>
<td>The destiny of the world: Christ’s resurrection sets in motion the transformation of all creation (Romans 8:21). Christ’s imminent return will be accompanied by the resurrection of righteous Israel &amp; all “in Christ.” After Christ destroys every ruler, authority &amp; power, including death, Christ will hand over the kingdom to God the Father who will be all in all (1 Corinthians 15).</td>
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<td>Regards Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative; interprets them through the lens of Pharisaic Oral Torah.</td>
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<td>Worshipped, studied &amp; taught in synagogues; participated in the prayers and sacrifices of the Jerusalem Temple.</td>
<td>Worshipped, studied &amp; taught in synagogues; participated in the prayers &amp; sacrifices of the Jerusalem Temple (Acts 13, 14, 17, 18, 21); established, preached &amp; taught in house-churches of Gentile Christ-followers.</td>
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Here Paul identifies himself as “an apostle — sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father…” (1:1). Paul is writing sometime between 53-56 CE in the midst of his “third missionary journey.” He is no longer a representative of the church in Antioch, nor of any other, but an apostle acting on his own authority as received directly from Christ. He is not alone, however, but writes on behalf of “all the members of God’s family who are with me” (1:2).

The letter is addressed to “the churches of Galatia” (1:2). These would be the congregations that Paul and Barnabas had established, and which he re-visited with Silas during the second missionary journey about 50-51 CE (Acts 15:40-16:5). These churches were located along the major Roman road, the Via Sebaste, in the Roman province of Galatia: Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe.

Galatia was ethnically and culturally diverse. Its residents consisted of:

- native Phrygians – spoke an Indo-European language
- native Cappadocians – referred to by the Greeks as “white Syrians”
- Galatians = Celts originally from central Europe who migrated to Macedonia, Greece, Thrace and finally about 278 BCE were invited to serve as mercenaries in Asia Minor; 10,000 families; gained control of the area became military overlords residing in fortified farmsteads; governed by tribal chiefs and judges; spoke Celtic languages
- Jews = 2000 families from Mesopotamia brought in about 210 BCE to help pacify the area and insure a stable, hard-working population
- Roman colonists brought in by Caesar Augustus after 25 BCE, settled primarily in cities of Antioch, Lystra, Iconium and other colonies

What connected all these communities: Greek language & customs; Roman political & military control.
The Galatian Christ-followers were mostly Gentiles (non-Israelites), many of whom would have been God-fearers: Greek speaking persons of various non-Israelite (Gentile) ethnicities who were loosely connected to Diaspora synagogue culture. They attended Sabbath and other gatherings, heard and studied the Hebrew Scriptures, and were familiar with the basic elements of Judaism but did not become proselytes, i.e. official/formal converts to Judaism and did not adopt Torah piety (e.g. dietary and purity practices).

Discussion Question:
In verse 4, Paul says that Christ “gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age.” What would that have meant to the Galatians Christ-followers? What might it mean to us today?

The Problem: Galatians 1:6-9
Paul accuses the members of his congregations of “deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ” — i.e. God! They are turning to a “different gospel,” one that is wrong or illegitimate from Paul’s perspective. More specifically “there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ.” Someone is proclaiming to them a gospel that is “contrary to what we proclaimed to you.” So what is this all about?

Central to Paul’s missionary message was his “law-free gospel,” his invitation to God-fearers and other Gentiles to participate in God’s redemption & salvation of the world by becoming Christ-followers without becoming proselytes to Judaism. This was the first big controversy that the early church had to deal with... how to incorporate Gentiles into what was essentially a movement of Jews within Judaism?

The “some who are confusing you” are members of the Jesus movement who were putting pressure on the Galatian Christ-followers to become Jewish proselytes and fully adopt Jewish religious and cultural practices such as circumcision of males, observance of the Sabbath and other festivals, dietary and purity regulations. This phenomenon is known as “Judaizing.” It could be prompted by factors such as:

- Religious zeal, e.g. Paul’s early career as a persecutor of the church was motivated by his zeal for the traditions of his ancestors. That there were other members of the early Jesus movement who insisted that there was only one way to be saved should not surprise us.
- Harassment and persecution by established synagogue communities that saw Paul’s evangelizing activities as sheep-rustling, luring away God-fearers to join the new Christ movement. The response of some members of Paul’s congregations took the form of appeasement: if the new churches followed Jewish practices the harassment and persecution would stop.
- Social pressure, harassment and persecution from Roman authorities to participate in the Emperor cult. The only persons exempt from participation in the Roman Empire were Jews. Adopting Jewish practices would enable Gentile Christ-followers to claim the same exemption.

Discussion Question:
What are some examples of “different” gospels that might confuse people today?
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REVIEW OF SESSION 1
The letter to the Galatians was written by Paul, an Israelite & Pharisee & follower of
Christ, sometime between 53-56 CE. The letter is addressed to members of congregations
that he had previously established in the cities of Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and
Derbe in Roman province of Galatia.

The problem that Paul addresses is the presence and preaching of persons who are
confusing the Galatian Christ-followers with “different gospel.” These disciples are
“Judaizing”, i.e. putting pressure on the Galatian Christ-followers to become Jewish
proselytes in order to be “saved.” This would mean accepting circumcision (for males),
“keeping kosher,” observing the Sabbath, and other Jewish practices. Judaizing was often
motivated by religious zeal, and as a response to social pressure, harassment and
persecution of Gentile Christ-followers by either Jews or pagans or both. Jews may have
seen the churches as rivals competing for the loyalty of “God-fearers” (= Gentiles
sympathetic to Judaism). Pagans would have been offended by and suspicious of the Gentile
Christ-followers’ refusal to participate in the Emperor cult which was growing in
importance.

READ GALATIANS 1:10-24
What is the origin of Paul’s gospel (1:10-12)? Compare Paul’s comments with Acts 9:1-19

How does Paul account for the dramatic change in his way of life from persecuting the
followers of Christ to acting as an envoy of Christ? Compare 1:15-16 with Jeremiah 1:5-6
and Isaiah 49:1, 6. What role does Paul seem to be claiming for himself?

What does Paul’s activity (verses 17-24) following his conversion and call say about his
character?
READ GALATIANS 2:1-10
Compare Paul’s account of his and Barnabas’ visit to Jerusalem (2:1-10) with the account of the apostolic council in Acts 15. What was the issue? What was the outcome?

READ GALATIANS 2:11-14
What was the problem that arose in Antioch? What was the outcome?

READ GALATIANS 2:15-21
Some heavy duty theological terms in verses 16-17:

**Justified:** is the same Greek word as “righteous” and means to be in right-relations with God, the world, and its inhabitants. To be justified is to be re-aligned in all our relationships. It involves a spiritual transformation that empowers a person to live in right-relations.

**Works of the Law:** the observance of Torah

**Faith in Jesus Christ:** is a mistranslation of the Greek *pisteos Iesou Christou* which means “faithfulness OF Christ”

**Believe:** is the Greek word *episteusamen* to have come to have faith in, to trust in

**Justified by faith in Christ:** actually says “justified out of the faithfulness of Christ”

So what Paul is actually saying is something like, “a person is spiritually transformed and empowered to live in right-relations, not by observing Torah (or any other laws for that matter), but by the faithfulness of Christ. We have have come to have faith/trust in Christ that his faithfulness will spiritually transform us and empower us to live in right-relations with God, the world and its inhabitants, and not by observance of Torah.

The point is that “justification by faith” is not about what believers must do; it always and only refers to what Christ as already done for us. Our response to that is faith/trust/loyalty/commitment to Christ.

Verses 19-20 are references to what happens in baptism: united with Christ in his death/crucifixion AND in his resurrection. Consequently, “it is now Christ who lives in me and the life I now live in the flesh I live in the faithfulness of God’s Son who loved and gave himself for me.”
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REVIEW OF SESSION 2
The letter to the Galatians was written about 53-56 CE by the apostle Paul to members of congregations that he had previously established in towns located along the main road running through the Roman province of Galatia. Other members of the Jesus movement appear to be pressuring the Gentile members of Paul’s congregations to become full-fledged Jewish proselytes. Part of their campaign includes questioning Paul’s credentials as an apostle. He responds in chapter 1 by asserting that the Gospel he proclaims is of divine origin, given to him by revelation. Paul understands himself to have been called directly by God, like a prophet, and not just an apostle (i.e. one commissioned to be an emissary of a particular person or church). In chapter 2 he describes how his proclamation was approved by the apostolic council in Jerusalem (49 CE), and how members of the so-called “circumcision faction” caused a falling out between himself, Peter and Barnabas in Antioch.

READ GALATIANS 2:15-21
Some heavy duty theological terms in verses 16-17:

Justified (Justification): is the same Greek word as “righteous” and means to be “right with” or in “right-relations” with God, others and ourselves.

Works of the Law: observance of Torah

Faith in Jesus Christ: is a mistranslation of the Greek pisteos Iesou Christou which means “faithfulness OF Christ”

Believe: translates the Greek verb pistes (noun form is pistis). It means something like “to have faith in,” “to trust in,” “to commit oneself to,” “to pledge one’s allegiance to.”

Justified by faith in Christ = “justified out of the faithfulness of Christ”

Paul’s point: God justifies us/makes us righteous because of the faithfulness of Christ, not because of anything we believe or do. God’s acceptance of us for the sake of Christ spiritually transforms and empowers us to live in right-relations with God, others and ourselves. To emphasize “justification by faith” is not about what we do. It always and only refers to what Christ as already done for us. Our response is faith/trust/loyalty/commitment.

Verses 19-20 refer to what happens in baptism: we united with Christ in his death AND in his resurrection. Consequently, “it is now Christ who lives in me and the life I now live in the flesh I live in the faithfulness of God’s Son who loved and gave himself for me.”
READ GALATIANS 3:1-29
Once again we begin with some terms and definitions:

**Flesh (sarx)** refers to the soft tissues of the human body which quickly decay at death. When applied to the whole person sarx carries the sense of being weak, transitory, ephemeral; and is the opposite of God who is strong, unchanging and eternal. When applied metaphorically to human behavior it signifies that which does not coincide with God’s will.

**Spirit (pneuma)** means wind (also breath). Daily practical experience demonstrated that wind was powerful, invisible and unpredictable. Theologically it refers to the activity or power of God.

**Righteousness** is an alternative translation of the Greek word *dikaiosune* which can also be translated as justification/justice. Righteousness thus refers to the condition of being accepted by God, a state of right-relations with God which should inevitably result in “just” relations with others. A **righteous** person is therefore one who has been accepted by God and deals justly with others.

**Questions for Reflection**

2. Paul defends his gospel proclamation by appealing to Scripture, specifically the Torah itself. What is the point of his argument in verses 6-9? How does this support Paul’s “law-free” Gospel that he proclaims to the Gentiles?

3. In the context of “Judaizing” what is the point of Paul’s scriptural argument in verses 10-14? Who is cursed according to Torah? Who is justified before God? What is Christ’s role in all this?

4. What is Paul’s point in verses 15-18?

5. What is the purpose of the law/commandments, according to Paul?

6. Verses 26-29 reflect early Christian baptismal practices. Reflect on how these verses might enrich your understanding of baptism and what it accomplishes.
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REVIEW OF SESSION 3
Paul responds to Judaizing Christ-followers who are trying to pressure Gentile members of his congregations to become full-fledged Jewish proselytes. This contradicts Paul’s understanding of justification = the process whereby Gentiles are accepted and approved by God. Paul insists that they are justified/accepted on account of the faith/faithfulness of Christ. Christ’s faithfulness was demonstrated by his willingness to go to the cross (to become a curse) in order to save those who are cursed, being outside of the Mosaic covenant. Those who “believe” (i.e. have faith in the faithfulness of Christ) become one with/in him through baptism regardless of ethnicity, status or gender. Paul asks the Galatians to trust their own experience: the Holy Spirit was given to them through their hearing and “believing” (i.e. having faith in) the good news of what God was doing in Jesus Christ, and not through keeping the commandments. The “law” is a tutor/guide that points out and restrains transgressions; it does not save.

READ GALATIANS 3:29-4:20
A couple of definitions

Elemental spirits refers to celestial bodies such as comets or stars; these were considered living beings that influenced people living on the lands over which they passed.

Redemption is language used in reference to the emancipation of slaves. It literally means the recovery of something that has been sold, pledged, mortgaged; the repayment of a debt. Slaves could purchase their freedom.

Questions for Reflection
1. What is the significance of Paul’s comment that “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring” (3:29)? What is the relationship of those “in Christ Jesus” and Abraham? How does it come about?

2. How does Christ redeem us from enslavement to the elemental spirits?

3. What is the point of Paul’s argument in verses 8-11? What connection does Paul draw between the elemental spirits and observance of the Jewish calendar?

4. What motive does Paul attribute to the rival missionaries who are promoting Judaizing?
READ GALATIANS 4:21-5:1 - THE ALLEGORY OF HAGAR AND SARAH
Paul engages in an allegorical interpretation of the story of Abraham’s two sons (see Genesis 16, 18, 21) that turns the traditional Jewish understanding upside down.
Paul’s churches in Galatia are troubled by Jesus-followers from Judea asserting that the Galatians must become full-fledged proselytes to Judaism in order to be saved. Paul’s argument is that the law itself (Torah) provides a way for Gentiles to enter into God’s people, i.e. the covenant with Abraham. The covenant with Abraham, established 430 years before the giving of the law at Mount Sinai, promises that all nations/Gentiles will be blessed through Abraham’s offspring. Christ is the offspring of Abraham who fulfills this promise by becoming a curse, i.e. putting himself outside the law into the same category as the Gentiles. Christ’s resurrection vindicates his faithfulness to God, and provides the way for Gentiles to be adopted into God’s people. They are accepted by God because of Christ’s faithfulness in which they participate through baptism — in baptism they are “clothed with Christ” (3:27). Basically Paul has a two covenant theory for how people become God’s people: (1) through birth into Israelite families a person becomes part of the covenant God made with Moses as Mt Sinai, (2) through adoption into Christ a person becomes part of the covenant God made with Abraham.

READ GALATIANS 5:1-15

1. What is the yoke of slavery to which Paul refers in verse 1?

2. What is the point of Paul’s argument in 5:1-6? How is righteousness possible for Christ-followers (5:5)? What is the meaning of “faith working through love” (5:6)?

3. What is the purpose of freedom in Christ?

4. Does Paul’s statement in 5:14 mean that the ethical commandments remain in force for Christ-followers?
1. Examine Paul’s list of “the works of the flesh” in 5:19-21. How many of these involve group dynamics? How many are purely individual “sins”? What does this say about what Paul values.

2. Examine Paul’s list of “the fruits of the Spirit.” How many of these involve group dynamics? How many are purely individual virtues? What does this say about what Paul values?

READ GALATIANS 6:1-18

1. What is “the law of Christ” (6:2)? See Galatians 5:6. How is the “law of Christ” fulfilled according to Paul?

2. What is the point of Galatians 6:6?

3. Paul refers again to his opponents, the Judaizing Christ-followers in 6:12-14. What motives does he attribute to them?

4. What are the “marks of Jesus” that Paul says are branded on his body? See 2 Corinthians 11:23-27.
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Luther (Commentary on Galatians, 1535) identified the main topic of Paul’s letter to the Galatians as being Christian righteousness.

Christian righteousness is the process of being restored to “right-relations” with God, our selves, others, including all creation. It is the undoing of the “fall” (Genesis 3) through a dynamic process of personal, communal, and global transformation.

Christian righteousness is initiated by God because of God’s essential grace and mercy. It involves 3 stages:

- **Justification** = God accepts us on account of Christ’s faithfulness (Galatians 2:15-21), which is enacted as we are “baptized into Christ” and are “clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). In Holy Baptism we are claimed as God’s own beloved sons and daughters in Christ for Christ’s sake and given the gift of the Holy Spirit, who awakens in us faith/trust/commitment/loyalty to the God who loves us.

- **Sanctification** = the process of being conformed to the image of Christ by the Holy Spirit working in our lives (see fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-26), calling us to continually repent, and turn back to God. Marks of this on-going life-long process include:
  - maturing as hearers of God’s Word: deepening engagement with Scripture
  - maturing in prayer: communion with God
  - maturing in freedom from bondage to (a) sinful ways of life in which we seek to be our own god and disregard the welfare of others; (b) ideologies of race, nationalism, domination, and wealth; (c) religious legalism
  - maturing in freedom for joyous obedience to God, and new opportunities of Christ-like service to our neighbor
  - maturing in solidarity (agape) with those whom God loves especially those who are different from us because of race, color, size, nationality, disability, sexual orientation and so forth, and especially those who are poor, neglected, discriminated against
  - maturing in thankfulness (eucharistia) and gratitude
  - maturing in hope that prays and works for the coming of God’s reign and the doing of God’s will in this world and in the next

- **Vocation** = our calling (election) to be partners with God in God’s mission in the world: the mending and restoration of all creation. This is a call not to privilege but a call to service in all the spheres of life: home, work, church and community. Our response is “stewardship” = using everything God has entrusted to us (time, energy, talents, resources) in ways that bring glory and honor to Christ.