

Galatians 1:6-17, 2:11-21

Paul is in a bind in Galatia. He founded the churches in that area and then, as he was wont to do, moved on to preach the gospel elsewhere. But not long after he left, some opponents arrived and cast doubt upon Paul's apostolic pedigree and proclamation. Often referred to as "Judaizers," these adversaries accused Paul of preaching "Christianity Lite" because Paul insisted that the Gentile Galatians did not have to become Jews to be Christian. That is, the males did not have to be circumcised and the Galatians did not have to keep kosher in order to attain the promises of the covenant. However, the Judaizers were insisting on circumcision. They further undermined Paul's message by questioning his authority.

After all, Paul never saw the earthly Jesus. Unlike the leaders of the church at Jerusalem, he was not part of Jesus' terrestrial in-group. What is worse, he spent a fair amount of energy trying to wipe out the church to the best of his extreme, zealous ability.

His self-defence begins from the first verse of Galatians: "Paul an apostle — sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead...". Already he shows that his call derives directly from Jesus and God. It does not get any more serious than that.

Paul is quite angry about what had happened in Galatia. He abandons the standard elements which begin a letter. Instead of following the stylised greeting with

a word of thanksgiving to God for the addressees or blessing God for them, he turns on them sharply in confrontation. Paul begins by remembering with the Galatians that he loved the law more than just about anyone. Once upon a time, he was even more enthralled with its observance. But, after God revealed God's son to him, everything changed. He stopped persecuting the church and began preaching to the Gentiles. As we heard, he expresses his amazement that they had turned away from the gospel he had presented to them.

"I am shocked that you are turning away from God, who in his love and mercy called you to share the eternal life he gives through Christ. You are already following a different way that pretends to be the Good News but is not the Good News at all. You are being fooled by those who twist and change the truth concerning Christ ... even if an angel comes from heaven and preaches any other message, let him be forever cursed." It's funny that the English translations launch into the Queen's English whenever Paul's language gets salty in Greek. "Let him be forever cursed." In Greek it's more like, "Damn them!"

It was not that they reverted to their pre-conversion beliefs. It was rather that they had been swept off their feet by a new set of preachers who were much more like fundamentalists than Paul. These newcomers upheld scripture to the letter and so insisted that the Galatians must be circumcised, as Genesis requires. They saw Paul's mission which excused Gentiles from circumcision as a sell-out of the truth. Paul was making faith easy. No wonder he was successful - all those God-fearers sitting up in the back of the synagogue holding out against being circumcised could

now all jump down and join. It was a coup for Paul's mission, but they saw it as a betrayal both of scripture and of Israel. To Paul their approach is anathema - a real curse, as it still is in Christianity today, though we are generally more polite. Although churches may not lock their doors, they can be very unfriendly toward a number of people and actions - the Catholic and Mennonite churches don't welcome divorced people; many fundamental and conservative congregations don't welcome gay people; some orthodox churches don't allow women in pants into their sanctuary; even some Lutheran congregations don't welcome children; to be welcomed in some churches, you are expected to tithe.

So Paul finds himself somewhat with his back to the wall. These opponents probably also claimed better credentials than Paul had. They could probably "name-drop" leading apostles with whom they had been associated. As for Paul he had no such authority.

There was much more at stake than Paul's ego. It was a matter of what lay at the heart of faith. Was it grace with freedom to remove barriers, including biblical ones if need be, or was it law enshrined in an attitude towards the bible (theirs at the time) which is so familiar to us from today's fundamentalists? The problems confronted Paul everywhere he turned, dogging him throughout his ministry. His willingness not to lie down and submit, but to assert at great cost what he believed to be true has left us the rich legacy of his letters.

Paul's call itself is rather unusual. No one saw it coming, least of all Paul

himself. Paul claims to have experienced a "revelation of Jesus Christ." The Greek is a bit obscure here: is it a revelation about Jesus Christ or a revelation given by Jesus Christ? Or does Paul mean both at once? The Greek prepositions are not exact in their meaning - they all have more than one meaning, depending on context.

In any case, Paul makes it abundantly clear that his call and ministry came directly from Jesus and God – not through human means and institutions. What does this mean for apostolic succession and direct lines of approved authority? Apostolic succession as believed by the Catholic, Orthodox and some other churches must come directly from the apostle Peter. So where does that leave Paul and the churches he established? These are difficult and important questions. Paul does an end-run around them all. He honours his own experience and he refuses to budge in the face of human "trappings." Now, we may agree or disagree with Paul (the record shows that at every turn in his ministry people disagreed with Paul – Jews, Gentiles, Romans, and many others.

We often hear testimonies of those who were living salacious, degraded lives before they heard the call of Jesus and became Christians, even pastors. Those are good stories, but they are not Paul's story. He was doing quite well, actually, before his call. Paul "gave up what was good for what was better."

That Paul is on the defensive is clear in his statement: "In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!" Clearly, someone is accusing him. But notice that Paul faces the problem with his authority head – on: "True, I didn't hob-nob with the

earthly Jesus – my opponents are correct about that. But I know and understand and devote myself to my call as I know it. Period. And I will go to the wall on that and die for it." And he does. Martyrdom tends to give a person credibility.

He also does not deny the obvious: he did try to destroy the church, continually, habitually. This presents a bit of an "image problem." He readily owns the details of his former life and appears to be just as shocked as the churchly near-martyrs by his change of heart and purpose.

The basis for his understanding of the faith does not depend on instruction from senior apostles. It is not human and derived. It is divinely inspired. Christ met him and turned him around from being a leading persecutor to being an apostle to all the nations. His opponents might not have found this very convincing. Paul had to learn about the faith from somewhere. It didn't all happen on the road to Damascus.

In reality he probably had a better grasp of the gospel when he was fighting it than many did (and do) who claimed to be Christian. He must have sensed that what was at stake was not just sets of laws, but Law itself, the will and being of God. These Christians, whom he was hassling, were threatening to shift the focus from commandments to a more dynamic approach which set love at the centre and applied it freely to life's issues - some of them, anyway.

When Paul flipped, it was not to a set of unfamiliar beliefs. It was to a set of beliefs whose attraction had probably heightened his anxiety, fear, and anger, to the

point where he broke down and began to be built anew. This could not be reduced to being given a package of instructions by senior apostles. It was a reflex and reflection of encounter with God, in which Paul now claimed he recovered what was God's purpose for his life from the very beginning. Yet, his opponents are trying to undermine his gospel of freedom by disputing his credentials and authority.

In Christ's name they are wanting to impose an understanding of faith that is based on strict observance of biblical laws. Paul knows that this fails to reach the heart of the faith that Jesus lived and died for. He refuses to allow himself to be drawn down into a debate about legal authorisation.

Paul never speaks of his "conversion"; rather, he refers only to his "call," borrowing the language of the prophet Jeremiah who speaks of his own call. Paul was not "converted" from one religion to another. When he became a Christian, he believed in the same God, drew upon the same Scriptures and moral code as he did in Judaism. Paul was called into Christian Judaism rather than Pharisaic Judaism. This is quite a different experience from many of his Gentile converts who actually were converting from one religion - from paganism, from Baal worship, or from no religion - to another by becoming Christian. They had to be taught about the God of the matriarchs and patriarchs and introduced to the categories of covenant, messiah, Scripture, righteousness, and law.

Paul was called to evangelize Gentiles, and he did so without requiring circumcision or keeping the food laws carefully laid out in the Torah. Those who

followed Paul told the Galatians that Paul had given them only part of the story and that they did, in fact, have to submit to circumcision and keeping the Law to be part of God's salvation plan. To put it succinctly, the question was:

"Do Gentiles have to become Jews to be Christians?"

Paul's resounding answer was *"Heck, no!"*

Paul declares his apostolic authority to be independent of any human being. He does, however, speak about a meeting with the Jerusalem leaders where they all perfectly agreed that they would evangelize Jews and Paul would evangelize Gentiles. Not everyone was happy with this arrangement. Apparently, some were irritated by the idea of Gentiles not having to keep the Law.

Even Peter and Barnabas disappointed Paul. Paul recounts a conversation he had with Peter in Antioch. The argument was over who had a place at the table and what kind of food would be served. Did Peter belong at a table with Gentiles? Did they belong at a meal with him? When Peter waffled on answers to these questions, Paul called him out as a hypocrite. Surely Peter knew better! Paraphrasing Paul, the conversation went something like this: "Look Peter, we are Jews. We love the law and even we know that keeping it doesn't create belonging with God for anybody!"

Justification, or belonging, is not a matter of law-observance. Belonging is a matter of the trust that connects us to Christ and the fidelity that connects Christ to

God. If Paul is justified, or belongs to God, and he trusts that he does, it is because Christ belongs to God and was faithful to that relationship no matter what. Describing Christ's faithfulness, Paul says, he "loved me and gave himself for me."

At any rate, Paul aims to set everyone straight, both Jew and Gentile (this is how Paul divides his world until his dying day). He needs to clarify the relationship between the law, faith, justification, and the cross. This is not easily done, and Paul will arduously attempt to work it out in his letter to the Galatians.

Paul, Peter, Barnabas and all Christians, Jewish or Gentile, are to realize that the works of the law (of which circumcision is considered one) cannot effect justification. Justification comes only from the faith of Jesus Christ. Paul worries that by submitting to circumcision, the Galatians will think that they have to adopt the whole law. He is so angry about the chopping off the foreskin bit that he makes numerous plays-on-words with "flesh" and "cutting" language later on in Galatians.

The works of the law served as a distinctive ethnic and religious identity marker for God's chosen people, the Jews. Now, Paul has no problem with the Law, but to understand his stance concerning it, one needs to understand that he divides salvation history into three epochs, each marked by a historical figure and a noun: Abraham and promise; Moses and Law; Jesus Christ and faith.

During the era of Abraham, righteousness was based on the promise. Abraham believed God and his belief in God he understood as righteousness.

Since there was no Law as of yet, Abraham's justification was patently not dependent upon the Law. Abraham, for Paul, is the prototypical Gentile convert who is justified apart from the Law (you can bet his Judaizing opponents disagreed thoroughly with this interpretation which makes the father of Judaism the first Gentile convert!)

The next phase in salvation history was that of the Law as mediated by Moses. The Law was good and it served its appropriate function, but that function was temporary (if necessary), much like that of a pedagogue or disciplinarian.

Paul wants the Galatians to see that those who live in the period of “Christ and faith” gain righteousness through the means of that faith and no other way. It is not as if the promise or the Law were negative in any way at all; it is simply a matter of locating ourselves accurately in the chronology of salvation history.

So convinced is Paul that faith sets people free and that this has a transforming effect which goes far beyond what meticulous observance of laws, including biblical laws, can achieve, he will go on to speak of love not as a reason to keep rules, but as a fruit of the Spirit.

“God called me through His grace.” If the apostle Paul had possessed a Twitter account, he might have wished for that as a trending message on social media. The assertion characterizes the heart of his identity: he has been called by God to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

It is not a job for which he applied, nor was he looking to make a substantial change in his life's direction. Nevertheless, "God called me through His grace" is shorthand for Paul's spiritual autobiography. It stands for a dramatic transformation – from persecutor to preacher – and gives evidence of the hand of God at work in his life.

This fundamental conviction, that he has been called by God, anchors Paul's faith story. He tells that story in order to remind the Galatians of their own experience of "the one who called you in the grace of Christ."

God's call was for him to share the good news. So that is what he did. Paul was arguably the most influential Christ-follower who never laid eyes on the earthly Jesus. He shares his faith story in order to encourage the Galatians to examine their own experiences for signs of God's call. Paul's faith story has survived and encourages us all to respond to God's call. As Christ-followers who never laid eyes on the earthly Jesus - we too - all of us - are called to share the Good News of God's unconditional love for all the world.

Amen.