

## Pugnacious Paul

Some of you may remember that in my first summer here I preached a series of sermons out of Paul's Letter to the Romans. I haven't done too many other long series since then but the Revised Common Lectionary this year presents an opportunity I couldn't pass up. Beginning in Pentecost and stretching all the way to Advent, one of the readings each week is from one of Paul's shorter letters, those to the Galatians, the Colossians, to Philemon and Timothy, and his second letter to the Thessalonians. Since we've not explored these letters together, I thought it might be fun to follow this track. Of course, I understand that my idea of fun is a little peculiar sometimes.

It's appropriate that we're beginning with Galatians. Not only is it the first of those shorter Pauline letters that we find in the New Testament after the long letters to the Romans and the Corinthians but it may also be chronologically the first of Paul's letters. Richard Longenecker, Professor of New Testament at the University of Toronto and author of the excellent Word Biblical Commentary volume on Galatians, writes, "... it (possibly) antedates everything else written in the NT. It is necessary, therefore, to understand Galatians aright if we are to understand Paul and the rest of the NT aright." Longenecker and other scholars believe that Galatians may have been written even prior to the famous Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15, which I mentioned last week, at which the leaders of the early Church ratified the release for Gentile Christians from most of the Jewish Law. As we will see in our study of this little book, the relationship of Gentile Christians to Torah is central to the issues Paul is writing about.

It's also interesting to note, for reasons that I'll discuss more in upcoming weeks, that the Galatians to whom Paul is writing may not fit our presuppositions about people who were living in what is now Turkey during the First Century (or now for that matter). Because Turkey is a predominantly Islamic country, despite their secular form of government, and a former part of the Ottoman Empire, we may tend to think of its people as closely akin to the Arabs and other Semitic peoples of the Middle East. But the word Γαλαται or Galatians was used interchangeably by Greek speakers of the time with the word Κελται, while Latin writers swapped the words *Galatae*, *Galli*, and *Celtae* freely. In other words, people of Paul's time still remembered that the inhabitants of a substantial part of Asia Minor were descended from that well-traveled and influential group, the Celts. The ancestors of the Celtic people of Ireland, the Gaelic people of Scotland and the Gallic people of France had originated in the Danube River basin of central Europe, before migrating into Switzerland, southern Germany, and northern Italy, then into France and Britain, and finally southeastward into the Balkan peninsula and Asia Minor. If you trace your ancestry to any of those places in Europe, the Galatians are your distant cousins.

More to the point this morning, however, is the situation which caused Paul to write the first of his extant epistles. Paul himself had established the churches to whom he was writing during his very earliest missionary forays. But after his departure, these churches had apparently been visited by other missionaries from Jerusalem, observant Jewish followers of Jesus who insisted that Gentile converts to what was to them a new sect of Judaism should also completely follow the Jewish Law. They were to keep Kosher and the men were to be circumcised. If they failed to do these things, the new missionaries warned, they would not be following the "full gospel;" they would not be *real* Christians. And besides, the new missionaries asked the Galatians, who was this Paul anyway, that he could tell them how to be Christians? He was not one of the

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Twelve or of the Seventy that Christ himself had sent out or even one who had been swept up in the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost when so many had been converted. He was a Johnny-Come-Lately and, worse, he had been an ardent persecutor of the Church not so long before. Now, they charged, he was preaching an “easy gospel,” letting converts out of the hard work of following the Law in order to rack up more conversions.

The late Dr. Harold Songer, under whom I studied New Testament at Southern Seminary, used to say that to understand Paul you had to read everything through the lens of his experience on the Damascus Road, when he encountered the Spirit of the Risen Jesus. For Paul, to have someone question the validity of his experience as one sent by Christ or to dismiss the Good News that had completely changed his life was intolerable. In nearly all of his letters to churches, Paul gives a long opening praising them for various things before he approaches the topic of his letter, but listen as I read to you from the opening of Galatians as Paul might have dictated it:

“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— and all the members of God’s family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! Am I now seeking human approval, or God’s approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.”

I think I begin to understand why Acts records that Paul was always getting beaten up and threatened with death. If this is how he wrote to his friends... And we read in verse 14 of chapter two that he publicly accused Peter of hypocrisy when Peter stopped eating with Gentile Christians after being pressured by the same group that was criticizing Paul. We know from his own writing in the Letter to the Romans and elsewhere that Paul was well aware of his own faults. That moment on the road to Damascus changed him radically but the change continued to work over the years. The Paul who wrote this letter to the Galatians is not terribly different in temperament from the young Pharisee who took after the Church with such zeal. Martin Luther, another rather hot tempered hero of the Church, called Galatians his favorite book of the Bible but according to Craig Koester of Luther Northwest Theological Seminary in St. Paul, “Other interpreters have been less enchanted with the letter. Its rhetoric is impassioned and sometimes extreme.”

After opening his letter with a broadside against his detractors, Paul goes on to defend his authority as an apostle in the passage which I read a few minutes ago. By the way, when he says he went to visit Cephas, he’s using the Aramaic form of Peter’s nickname: Πετρος in Greek and *Kephas* in Aramaic both mean “Rock.” He goes on to tell of a private meeting he had fourteen years later with the leaders in Jerusalem, accompanied by Barnabas and Titus, perhaps

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the occasion upon which he and Barnabas delivered the famine relief funds to Jerusalem from the churches around Antioch. He points out that even though Titus was a Gentile convert, the leaders of the Jerusalem church – James, Peter and John – did not insist that he be circumcised, giving the lie to the claim of the missionaries who followed him to Galatia that they were operating under orders from those three. According to Paul, in chapter 2, verses 7-10, James & Peter & John recognized his call to be Apostle to the Gentiles and only asked of him that he continue to collect funds for the poor of Jerusalem, “which,” he writes, “was actually what I was eager to do.”

So, other than recognizing Paul as a hothead and learning a little more of his story, what can we learn from this furious introduction and exposition. As Longenecker suggests with his remark that we must understand Galatians to understand Paul, we find in this first chapter and a half or so the first treatment of a topic that will be central to all of Paul’s writings – the interplay of faith and works in salvation. We also find clues to another aspect of Paul’s correspondence which many people do not readily associate with Paul and which you would hardly expect to find in this angry letter – the importance of Christian love for the other.

The first of these ideas is pretty clear. Paul is ready to go to war over the primacy of faith over works, of grace over law. He stakes out his position in his brief greeting to the Galatians: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age...” For Paul, the heart of the Good News is grace and freedom. Out of God’s love for us, love undeserved by us, Jesus gave up his life to give us freedom from everything that binds us, including the Law. Paul has taken to heart Jesus’ stinging description of his former colleagues, the Pharisees, and their devotion to the Law: “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and they lay them on the shoulders of others...” Paul has come to understand, like Jesus, that the Law was created to serve humankind, not the other way around. Later in this letter, we will find that Paul also writes of the importance of responsibility to God and to other people, but it is a responsibility born out of the benefits of freedom, not one imposed in a legalistic way.

Paul would have his readers remember, us included, that no kind of legalism can be substituted for a free relationship with the Living Christ. The Methodist commentator Safiyah Fosua writes, “He wants them to know the same immediate relationship with Jesus Christ that he has, a relationship that does not require mediation by the cultural/religious practices of Judean or diaspora Judaism.” This unmediated relationship with Christ Jesus is a concept that should be familiar to us as we look back on our celebration of 400 years of the Baptist Movement and our discussion of Soul Liberty – the idea that each individual is responsible to God alone for their relationship with God, though it is to be forged in the context of the community of believers. Blind adherence to a code, whether it be a code of the left, right or center, must never replace an active, free search for the will of God in one’s own life. Circumcision does not save, dietary practice does not save, allegiance to a political party, membership in an organization, hours spent in a soup kitchen or in study of the Scriptures or in prayer – none of these save. Only the freely given grace of God, realized in Christ crucified, sets us free from the present evil age, allowing us to live the abundant life promised by Jesus and to make our contribution to creating God’s Beloved Community. We do not save ourselves. We cannot play God.

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There is another issue with the so-called Judaizers demand of adherence to the Law for Gentile Christians and Peter's withdrawal of table fellowship with them. It sets up a tiered system with first-class and second-class Christians. In a few weeks we will look at one of Paul's most famous statements about how there are no differences between those who are in Christ in the eyes of God and I want to save some sermon for then. But I think it is good to remember that Paul's fury with Peter is not simply over an obscure theological matter but over the very real hurt and damage that can be done when we begin playing, "you're not as good a Christian as I am" games with one another.

As we think about this showdown between Peter and Paul, however, there's another very important lesson that I think we can draw from that situation. It's pretty easy to read the Epistle to the Galatians and focus on the dispute that Paul was having with the Judaizers, the ones who wanted Gentile Christians to be converts to Judaism as well as to the Way of Jesus. In the history of our faith, the Judaizers lost that fight. Christians in general do not feel called to keep Kosher, male circumcision is a decision left to parents and pediatricians, and so forth. But what do we do with the fact that Paul also went toe-to-toe with Peter? These, after all, are two of the greatest heroes of the early Church. It's hard to play down a conflict such as Paul describes in chapter two: "when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"' Again, we see Paul's pugnacious nature. To get in a man's face and call him out in public does not sound like the peace of Christ. And there's no indication in the rest of the letter that they kissed and made up any time soon. We must certainly hope that, as Longenecker and the others have suggested, this letter was written before the Jerusalem Council in which a compromise was reached or we have the spectre of a feud between Peter and Paul lasting until their deaths.

Or do we? There is ample evidence in Acts and in others of Paul's letters that he went on raising money for the poor of the Jerusalem Church until his final imprisonment, the very congregations guided by Peter and the other Jewish Christians with whom he was in conflict. As Sarah Dylan Breuer mentions in her blog on this passage, "Paul spends no small amount of political capital to get churches he founded to take up a collection for their sisters and brothers in Christ in Jerusalem." He went out of his way to keep the pledge he made to James and Peter and John. And Paul never again mentions Peter as an antagonist in his letters. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, he mentions that some Christians are overly proud of their conversion by Peter but he says the same of himself and Apollos and seems to refer to Peter as a role model in ministry. Despite their very real and violent disagreement in the matter described in Galatians, Paul does not seem to hold a grudge.

In a day in which denominations are splitting over who should be in fellowship with who, the table fellowship fight in Galatians seems especially relevant. Passions have run high in every denomination you'd care to name on related issues and perhaps they should, though I for one would hope that we could keep our debates slightly more civil than Paul. But I would also hope

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that we would emulate Paul in at least one way – once we’ve had our say and either worked it out or agreed to disagree, we should, like Paul with Peter, remember to honor each other’s commitment to Christ and to honor our commitments to each other to join in doing the work that Jesus proclaimed: to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor. After all, two thousand years later, while one group or another of us may still give preference to Peter over Paul or vice-versa, we still recognize them both as saints of God, regardless of their quarrel. It may be that in another two thousand years, the loudest voices on both sides of current debates are similarly remembered.

So that’s our introduction to pugnacious Paul and his letter to our Galatian cousins. The opening salvo, you might say. We’ll continue our exploration of his themes of faith and works and of Christian unity in upcoming weeks. But I would leave us this morning with Paul’s own words from the end of chapter one. Despite his shady and bloody reputation, when the people of the churches in Judea heard how he was proclaiming the Good News of Jesus, they were thrilled. “And they glorified God because of me,” Paul writes. For Paul and for Peter and for James and John and all of those who lift up Jesus as Lord, let us glorify God. Amen.