

## BELIEVING THE GOSPEL

On the surface of things – the historical part – Paul seems to have received a letter or a visit from some friends who informed him that the Galatian churches were being strongly influenced by pressure from the Jerusalem church. Under this influence from what seemed at the time to be the center and source of Christianity – headed by a leader with awesome credentials as the biological brother of Jesus – the Galatian churches were turning back to the precepts and practices of Judaism as necessary for salvation. It was no longer enough to believe in the love of God and live your life under the influence of the Risen Christ; it was also necessary to eat kosher food, be circumcised, keep Sabbath Day laws, and do all the other things prescribed by Jewish law and tradition. (How can we translate? It was necessary to be baptized, celebrate birthdays, buy people Christmas presents, graduate from college and become successful, do email. Otherwise, you were not truly acceptable.) Of course, to the Jerusalem church, the purpose behind requiring all this was stronger than that – stronger than custom or ethnic identity. It included all that, but went beyond it. The favor and the acceptance of the Holy God were at stake. Nevertheless, if *Jews* did these things, the whole culture around them supported it. But if *Gentiles* did these things, they would be cut off from family, friends, and work, and nothing in the culture around them supported or understood these things. Therefore, Gentiles had a hard time understanding why these practices were beneficial. Since they didn't have the same history or tradition to back it up, most of them had a hard time with "Because God said so!" Some of our ethnic Christian friends have the same problem with some of us today.

Paul is both alarmed and irked by this situation – by the Galatian Jewish converts turning back to what has been familiar and safe for them. Paul knows that if this trend continues, it will limit the Gospel to those of Jewish origin, even in far-flung Galatia. He comes to that strange place where he must defend his credentials, his Message, and his behavior to the very people who got excited about the Gospel of Jesus because of him in the first place. Without Paul, they would not have the life, the faith, or the community they now have. They have seen him beaten and stoned for his efforts, and still carrying on despite severe illness and bad eyesight. Now "hotshots" from the so-called "Mother Church" – from the human hierarchy – have been talking them out of the

very things that got them all excited in the first place. They do not want to go back, but what if Paul was wrong? What if God is getting angry and about to punish them? They are afraid, and so they start to waver. It's not easy to move beyond everything we have known and been taught since childhood.

*"You stupid Galatians!"* begins the third chapter of Paul's letter. I am trying to get you to forgive Paul for speaking so harshly. Some of you have translations that say, *"You foolish Galatians!"* You think that softens it? *"Whoever calls a brother 'fool' will be liable for Gehenna fire."* (Matthew 5:22, Sermon on the Mount) If this teaching from Jesus is known in the early church, is Paul deliberately risking the fires of Hell to "reach" his Galatian friends? Probably. And also trusting the mercies of Christ beyond the teaching, and thus risking his eternal future on the very Gospel he is re-presenting to the Galatians. Paul does that a lot.

Well, that was a long time ago. Paul really lived and the Galatian Christians really lived, and the decisions they made changed the course of history – and that is all interesting as history. Yet history is not the only link we have with this letter, or the Galatians who wrestled with it. The letter raises issues that plague and bless the Path of every person who tries to walk the Christian WAY.

Paul makes many statements and assertions in this letter to the Galatians, but he also asks powerful questions: Who has bewitched you? What is your experience so far? Do you look to the spiritual, or to the material, to save you? Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the Law, or by believing the Gospel Message? Do you hear him asking you these same questions?

Because it is "Bible language" and our minds put it in "Bible categories," we sometimes miss the realism. Paul is not appealing to creeds; none of them have been written yet. He is not trying to remind his friends of something they learned in Sunday School; there would be no Sunday Schools for another eighteen hundred years. Paul cannot appeal to ecclesiastical authority because what exists of that resides most predominantly in the Jerusalem church, where opposition against him is strongest. (Not officially, of course, but whenever his back is turned.) Behind the words we now think are so formal, Paul is asking his friends: What has your life been like so far? What is your *experience*?

Can you hear it on that level? What about your *own* experience? What has made you truly “happy” in life? Trying hard to be “right,” and trying hard to make everybody around you be “right” – has that made you happy? You all have some experience of living in that mode, I presume. You all have experience of people around you living in that mode, I presume.

We are now going to fix this bad and scary world – and this is the way to do it, and everybody has to help by doing it this “right way.” So woe betide anybody who doesn’t do it “right,” who makes a mistake – who eats wrong, drives wrong, votes wrong, thinks wrong, acts wrong. God will save us when we all get it right and make everybody else get it right. There are deep themes of life that run along this wavelength, and there are few who have not tasted them. Paul is asking his friends: Did this make you happy? Is this what you really want to go back to? More accurately, Paul is asking: Now that you have tasted the forgiveness and support of the Holy Spirit for a while, now that you have actually started to experience community built on a different premise – on love, and mercy, and new chances – do you really want to return to the way it was before? Never mind love, compassion, acceptance, support; we are here to ferret out errors, to judge, to condemn, to punish ... until we all get it “right.” Life is not about learning and growing; life begins after we get it right. Does this mindset make you happy?

Am I getting you back into “Bible language,” or am I getting you into the *real* Bible? What has made you feel most alive, challenged, thrilled, and fulfilled in *your* trek through life so far? And maybe I have to add: Not the momentary thrills, but the deep stuff that sticks and lasts? What makes you most deeply thankful to be alive? In conversations that quietly ponder such topics, we usually don’t hear about bank accounts, trophies, material objects, or times we put other people down. More accurately, these are not the focus. They are often involved in the settings, but the outer efforts are done “for my mother” or father, or brother or sister, or a friend or a spouse or a child. It is not just accomplishment – it is accomplishment FOR someone. Even “acquiring” – the passionate part of it – nearly always has someone else in mind. For most of the people I’ve known, what makes life worth living touches on healing, transformation, appreciation, understanding, teamship, the search for truth or beauty. And usually there is a hunger, however hidden, for some kind of intimacy, some form of love – including encounters with the Holy One. All the rest are merely stage props.

“*You stupid Galatians!*” Paul says. “I know you. I was there. I saw you coming awake to the presence and reality of the Holy Spirit. And I watched the Spirit changing your lives – giving you a whole new awareness and faith in God’s love, and putting you into a whole new bond of acceptance and caring and support for one another. And now you are thinking of trading it all in for the way it was before? Somebody must have cast a great spell over you – a spell of blindness and memory loss, a spell of unknowing. How else to explain such stupid behavior!”

This passage reminds me that it is not enough for me to know something or to have experienced something. It is not even enough for God to have set up an encounter with me or to have died for me and raised me up – and God has certainly done all of this for me, more than once. But there is one more piece to it, sometimes called RECEIVING: I have to *trust* it, remember it, and let it in to change the way I react and respond to life, and to everything around me. And I have to trust it enough to *expect* God to go on acting this way toward me in the future.

Humans, or at least this human and the Galatian humans, are perfectly capable of turning away from the very things that have worked best for them – the things that have worked wonders in their lives. Over and over, I have persuaded people to start praying on a daily basis. They have done so and, by their own admission, their lives have improved immensely. You would think that no power on earth could ever again persuade them to stop praying. So what do they do? That’s right! They stop praying. And you know what else? It happens to me too, even after all these years. Our time with God has to be our absolute top priority, or this world will steal it away from us. There are no exceptions. That’s the way it is.

Often I have spoken with men about the most satisfying and exciting times in their lives. Invariably, some of these times have been times of deep companionship with other men. Not always, but many times the outer circumstances were somewhere between challenging and incredibly dangerous. It was war, a company crisis, or some threatening dilemma. But within this context, the common denominator has been friendship – sharing the adventure; being for and with each other in the heat of the day. At some time or another, friends have been a lot of the reason why life has been worthwhile. So what do most men do? They stop seeking friends, stop spending any time with other men, stop having any male friends – and they try to make sure they don’t get into any more situations where they might need each other ever again.

I am simply saying that humans are very capable of turning away from the very things that they cherish most, that have worked best for them, that they care about most of all. And you think there is no Satan?! Humility works best, so we concentrate on pride. Apologies and repentance work best, so we concentrate on being right and never saying "I'm sorry." Honesty works best, so we find dozens of reasons for pretense and subterfuge. Forgiveness works best, so we concentrate on getting even. Serving God works best, so we serve ourselves, or others.

I correspond with a friend from a former parish. She has continually amazed me with her growth, wisdom, courage, and steady commitment. Few would have imagined that a woman coming out of her background could have built a life and a family so steadily and consistently. She has two lovely daughters and a very responsible job, and all seemed to be going well for years.

So I was very sad when I heard her start to talk about leaving her husband. They had been through a lot, good and bad, but I felt like they had also been a big part of each other's growth and progress. Now she was dissatisfied with almost everything about the relationship, and her intolerance for the level of intimacy and communication and appreciation had her ready to turn it all in. I began to suggest some things from afar, but she was tired of trying. The motivation was gone. Then one day I received a letter that included this paragraph:

"Bill was very ill early this summer. He got Valley Fever, a potentially lethal virus. We were on pins and needles for a while. It takes months to get over. He is much better now, but still low on stamina. I cooked a lot of soup for him and realized I don't want to grow old without him."

Why did it take Valley Fever for her to realize this, to remember it – for it to be real for the two of them again? Sometimes it just does. Can you imagine them at their fiftieth wedding anniversary? "Tell us, what's the secret of your long and happy marriage? So many couples don't make it. What helped you?" Valley Fever. "I cooked a lot of soup for him and realized I didn't want to grow old without him." Without Valley Fever, she wouldn't have started doing things for him in that way again. And without Valley Fever, he wouldn't have been able to receive from her. And without Valley Fever, the two of them might never have started talking to each other on caring, personal levels again. God has counseling tricks I've never been able to come up with.

Paul's big question is the deepest one of all: "*Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the Law, or by believing the Gospel message?*" Let me rephrase: Is the relationship you have with God because you live such an exemplary life, or because you have come to believe in God's personal love and caring for you, no matter what?

There are still many people whose link to God is based on how well they think they're doing – how right they are, how good they are, how successful they are, how moral they are. Many others turn to God because they think it will be the key to their becoming right and good and successful. In either case, if caught in a mistake or a wrong action, their link with God is shattered. If adversity comes and their success is diminished or destroyed, their connection with God is shaken. Isn't it a sad thing that even Almighty God has so many fair-weather friends? Paul is asking: Are you one of those people – are you going back to that basis of relationship with God? You who have known the Cross and felt the presence of the Son of God in your own life and mind and heart, are you now going back to depend upon your own goodness or on this world's approval – on outer signs or rituals or forms?

Please back up with me for just a minute. We need to see how Paul's personal argument with the Galatians (and maybe with us) fits into the larger picture of Christian meaning and experience. Jesus came (or was sent) out of highest Heaven to participate with us here on earth, to show and tell what the mind and heart of God are really like, that we might know God – that we might get past our fear and anger toward the Creator of this place and be reconciled, and start trusting ourselves to both the Creator and the destiny for which we were designed.

The early church quickly came to understand Jesus' life and ministry as something reaching far beyond Palestine – far beyond one moment in earth history. (There are seeds of it in Paul's writing, and it's even more clear in John's Gospel.) A concept now called "the preexistent Christ" was part of the understanding from as early as people had time to think about it. "*In the beginning was the Word ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*"

In other words, the physical carpenter from Nazareth was not understood to be an isolated quirk of God's caring. The Christ always has been and always will be of the nature and character revealed and made plain to us in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. God's love did not

start when Jesus started His ministry, as if it had never existed before. Jesus' life, death, and resurrection revealed it more clearly than it had ever been seen before. In the old phrase: Jesus did not *invent* God or God's love; God sent Jesus to *reveal* it – to reveal God's very self.

What is at stake? Why was the emphasis on the preexistence of Christ so important to the early church, and why has it been to all Christians ever since? Two things:

1.) If the Christian Faith is merely a matter of the physical ministry of Jesus, then the drama is time-locked and has true relevance only to people who lived in the first century A.D., and in one very tiny portion of the world.

2.) If the Christ has always existed (if the love and grace of God have always existed), then why haven't we humans always known it and acted like it? Why did Jesus have to come, if the Christ has always been here trying to help us?

The answer, not just in my words but in many Christian writings down through the ages, has been that God has always loved us, but we did not know or trust it. The Holy Spirit has always tracked us – each one personally – and tried to guide and help and reassure us, but we have been mostly too frightened or too busy to notice. And when we *did* notice, it seemed so unlikely and preposterous that we talked ourselves back out of it before it could take full effect. The notion that Almighty God could have that kind of concern for specks like us? Not likely! We must be imagining it ...

A few caught glimpses – Abraham, Moses, Jeremiah. And there have been some others from various other traditions who have sensed the presence of God and didn't think the truth was what most people suspected it to be. But mostly the world has been frightened or angry toward God. And though many are busy trying to rework or reinvent the records, primitive religions are *not* full of a friendly, caring God. Nor has the coming of Jesus been able to convert us very quickly from all our old approaches and superstitions. Even the church keeps going back to the ways we thought and behaved before, which is the very thing Paul is ranting about in this letter.

So Jesus came that we might know. The Spirit must necessarily speak in a whisper – influence gently and quietly ... most of the time. Otherwise our free will would be destroyed. God must walk softly in this world, or coercion would quickly replace our chance to learn and grow – to respond and return the love authentically, because we really mean it.

But it's hard, in this physical, limited, alienated world, to hear and believe the whisper of the Spirit. So God cheated up to the maximum degree possible without taking away our choice: The *embodiment* of the Spirit. The *demonstration* of the character, personality, agenda, method, values, passion of the Holy Spirit. "*The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.*"

But if this is at all true, then Christianity – *from the beginning* – has never been as narrow, exclusive, damning, haughty, or conceited as so many of its later proponents have made it sound, or as so many of its detractors have supposed. Once we realize this, we begin to hear Paul and John and the others saying almost the reverse of what the majority of people in our time seem to be hearing them say.

I don't see how we can straighten such things out, except in our own faith, and in our own faith family. Nevertheless, with great sadness – and sometimes with awareness enough to convert us – we see the reaction of our world to this embodiment of love and caring and spiritual power. It came to a Cross – and, by the power of God, to Resurrection – and Jesus left saying: "When I return to my true identity and dimensions – when I can be with you, each one, at all times and in all places – do not doubt that I am here. Pay attention to my whisper and trust it. Know that I am tracking you always to the ends of the earth, and to the end of time. Now that you have locked-on to my signal, trust it ... trust ME. I love you, and you saw me prove it. I will go on loving you and guiding you. Do not turn off again. Do not let anything ever persuade you that I do not care. And no matter how tough it gets or how big your blunders, never believe – never let *anything* or *anyone* persuade you, ever again – that I have quit on you. And try to love each other the way I love you."