

A NEW YEAR TO BE NEW IN

We all have thoughts about the coming year, and possibly thoughts of how the last one went, and how fast it went. Wonderful things have happened in our lives, and some not so wonderful things too. Many of us feel a low-grade guilt that we live in such a wonderful country, and in such a lovely and privileged area. We try to think that we deserve our blessings, yet recognize that a huge percentage of the population of our world has never had a chance at such privilege and abundance. Sometimes we would like to be Hindu, so we could believe that where we are born and what we are born into are all a matter of karma, and we deserve our good fortune from merit in past lives – and that the poor are only getting what they deserve, and so we don't have to feel so sorry for them. But we are not Hindu. And to make it worse, there are always jealousy and resentment from some of those who have less toward those who have more. If we wonder about that, we have only to think of our own propensity toward jealousy and resentment, for there are always those who have more than we do, and we don't always think that they are more gifted or brilliant or deserving than others we know, including ourselves.

So, am I leading up to a sermon about the sources of terrorism? We could easily go there, but it yields insights that change nothing. Am I leading up to a rousing call to social action – the Christian responsibility of the rich to give more and more to the poor? Some of you keep wishing I would. By the way, that is the “liberal Christian” version of a “hellfire and brimstone” sermon. The old conservative preachers tried to scare the sin out of people with images of the burning fires of Hell – and who's to say it did no good? The liberal preachers tried to scare the individualism out of people with images of how much they had to give to worthy causes if they were to qualify as really truly Christians – and who's to say it did no good?

Well, both have done a lot of harm too. Only one kind of fear is a helpful foundation for the Christian Life – fear of the Lord – and that's a different sort of fear altogether. Fear of the fires of punishment and Hell only drives us away from trust in the love of God, and away from our own true identity and purposes. Even at best, fear of Hell only drives us deeper into the LAW, and deeper into anger and judgment against those who do not keep the LAW. Inevitably, if secretly, it rebounds on us, and steals our love and compassion.

And yes, there are wondrous acts and sacrifices of love that *do* change people's lives. If we never engage in them, we are very far indeed from the Christian Life. But the programs and approaches of the liberal church to save and solve the world's problems have done nothing to change the dynamics of our world, however hotly we try to defend them. After a hundred years of such endeavors, are there fewer poor; do they love Jesus more; have their lives changed; do they now live to help others? We have only convinced the poor that it is our obligation to give them more and more, and that it is even their right to demand it. They feel less and less gratitude, even if they pretend. And more and more, they curse us if we refuse, as if there were no bottom to our pockets and our only excuse for not giving could be that we are poorer than they are. Less and less do we hear – either from our peers or from our pulpits – about responsibility for our own families, our own friends, or our own purposes and assignments under Christ. And in fact, the lives of liberal Christians get more frantic and more scattered all the time, their homes become weaker and more neglected, and their sense of calling and vocation grows thinner, as they frantically strive to do more and more “good.” The concept of “love your neighbor” is turning into a blight upon the land, as it has become more and more separated from the primary concept that carries and sustains it: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your mind, and with all your soul, and with all your strength.”* That is the first and greatest commandment, and if we move to the second without knowing the first, we ruin everything we touch. Then it is “my love” that is going to save my neighbor – more and more I try to run and control my neighbor's life, and God has a harder and harder time even getting into the picture.

There are doubtless many dimensions to life. But in the larger perspective, there are two: The physical and the spiritual. The outer and the inner – what we think is going on all around us, and what God is really doing in our world. Jesus came to show us the second – the inner – the larger and more real of these two dimensions. He dealt with the outer world, but we don't have to track Him for very long before realizing that He was focused on and living for a different, spiritual dimension. If we want to follow Him, we have to move toward this inner dimension. When we get baptized, we say we are dying to the outer dimension and coming alive to the inner dimension. Nothing about the Christian Life makes any sense from the perspective of the outer dimension. Those who try to live the Christian Life without changing dimensions end up with a hybrid “faith” that expects worldly success as a trade-off for pleasing God. Jesus or Peter or Paul wouldn't have

lasted ten minutes on that kind of faith. The crucifixion destroyed such constructs forever, though many people still seem blind to this, having refused to pay attention to the real story. Humans don't want to shift to the inner dimension and, for the most part, put it off for as long as possible. That is why it's called "conversion," and why conversion is such a jolt – and why it usually comes to most of us in crisis, and out of the "grace of point zero."

Some of you insist that you have come into the Christian Life on a smooth glide from childhood, because you grew up in the church and had wonderful parents. So did I, yet I get jolt after jolt. So did Peter and Paul and Augustine and Francis of Assisi and countless others. We can both admit that you are more mature, better rounded, and more likable in this world than I am. But why is it that people who have come to faith on this "smooth glide" lack passion for Jesus and His church – lack *commitment* – seldom or never bringing any converts into the Faith? There is a level of surrender missing – an experience of throwing away the old life and coming to Jesus with no holds barred. And over the years, I have noticed that "smooth glide" people always miss what I'm saying; even if they are nice to me (which frequently they are), I sense a resentment – a subtle annoyance – toward me. Why is that? Have I done something wrong, something to hurt you? In some ways yes, the worst hurt of all: I have continually mentioned that the first dimension of life is not enough, and that you should come into a very different one.

In any case, we cannot have a New Year if we are not "new" people in it. If we try to superimpose "newness" on the outer dimensions of life, we only get endless self-help programs, constant disciplines that back-fire, endless programs that make no difference. We can take any precept or teaching of the Christian Life and superimpose it on the outer dimensions of life, and all we ever get is the outer life: institutional religion – stage props without any of the peace of God, without a living relationship with Jesus, without the personal guidance of the Holy Spirit that shapes our lives from within on a daily basis.

Some of you are constantly disappointed because I will not lead this congregation into some really worthy new program or some exciting new cause. And you are right – I will not. That's because you want it to be impressive in the outer dimensions. And I know that will only distract us from the inner dimensions. I am not here to be a substitute for the Holy Spirit. I do not want to be in charge of your lives. I want you to put the Holy Spirit in charge of your lives. And we are only a true church

to the degree that all of us swear allegiance to the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ, and let Him be our true Leader. And yes, the Holy Spirit will organize and guide and empower us – both individually and together – to the degree that we will allow it. Do you really think I want to step in and destroy that because I'm too impatient to let us authentically grow into that dimension, that obedience, that love and passion for Jesus and His Kingdom? You have a better Leader than me. I am only teacher/preacher. My only purpose is to remind you of who your true Leader really is. And if you ever get a pastor who thinks that she or he is more qualified to guide your life than the Holy Spirit, I hope you will have mind and soul enough to invite them to go lead some other church.

You just heard the Apostle Paul paraphrased, didn't you? *"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel, but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we preached to you, let him be banned. As we have said before, so now I say again, 'If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be banned.'"* (Galatians 1:6-9)

Our problem (and our hope) is not how to get successful in the outer world; it is *how to penetrate from the outer world to the inner world* – from the physical reality to the spiritual reality. How do we get close and obedient to Jesus and His Holy Spirit everywhere we turn, in everything we do, in the way we see and perceive everything? Of course, we cannot do that of or by ourselves. Jesus will come to us and work this change within us, if we invite Him; He will move us from the outer to the inner dimension – from the physical to the spiritual life. If this is not true, then all of Christendom is a hoax – sound and fury signifying nothing! But the truth is that the longer we walk the Christian Way, the more we realize that we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit: we can invite and open ourselves to the Spirit; we can desire this penetration from the outer dimension to the inner dimension; at the very least, we can refuse to settle for the outer perspectives.

Am I sounding too vague for you? Credentials, for instance, are necessary in the outer world. We have to take that seriously. We *do* live here. We need college degrees and titles and positions to even get the chance to be very effective here, at least in most cases. You tell your children that all the time. It is your rationale for why they have to work

hard and do well in school. Being spiritual is no excuse for being lazy or irresponsible in the outer world. “In but not of the world” is no excuse for pretending we are not “in” the world.

But Paul is talking to people who are also supposed to be awake to the spiritual dimensions. So he is claiming spiritual credentials far beyond his rabbinical training, far beyond his years of study with Gamaliel. He is claiming credentials beyond his pedigree; beyond his Pharisaism; beyond his Judaism; beyond his Roman citizenship; beyond all his status and work in the outer world. Those earthly credentials, by the way, were still important to how effective Paul became. But with those alone, Paul would not even have been in the Christian Story. So, early in this letter to the Galatians, Paul is claiming his spiritual credentials. They do not cancel out his outer credentials; they simply move far beyond them. And Paul is making it very clear that he did not, indeed could not, get his spiritual credentials from human sources. That would be a contradiction in terms. *“I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin. I did not take it over from anyone; no one taught it to me; I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”* (Galatians 1:11-12) (The Damascus Road, of course.)

Now, we could get all complicated here, but let’s keep it clear and to the point: What drove Paul’s life were his spiritual credentials, not his worldly credentials. Furthermore, while his earthly credentials gave him some expertise and effectiveness that we appreciate – his ability to teach and preach, his understanding of the Scriptures, his confidence in argument, and so forth – his true power and impact came from his spiritual credentials. When push came to shove, as it often did for Paul, he could not escape the light of the Damascus Road, or all the ways in which that opened up his prayer life and his awareness of the presence of Jesus with him ever after. No earthly credentials could have sustained him through beatings, stonings, imprisonments, betrayals, and all the rest. No earthly credentials could have helped him to heal; to move so many hearts and lives; to stand against Peter and Barnabas and the entire weight of the Jerusalem church and its earthly leaders of far more fame and reputation than he had (at least at first), since he had come into the game as an enemy and murderer of Christians. Paul was wrong about some pretty important things, and he made some bad mistakes. No surprise to him. But he moved the infant church from the mindset of a small Jewish cult to a worldwide religion – and to awareness that

Jesus' love was for anyone and everyone who would trust it and receive it. You do not do that with earthly credentials!

Yes, well, hurray for Paul. But that was a long time ago. If we want to come new into *this* New Year, what about *our* spiritual credentials? Never mind your New Year's resolutions; they won't last much beyond this coming week anyway. But what about your spiritual credentials? They are what will drive and guide your life in the coming year – that is, if anything important will.

Beyond your credentials and your reputation in the outer world, beyond your role and effectiveness in the outer world, what are your credentials from the Holy Spirit? Why are you really here, and what are you really here to accomplish? We always – *always* – have to abandon some of the goals and purposes of the outer world in order to follow our spiritual destiny. We always – *always* – have to redirect our outer credentials if they are to serve our Lord and His purposes. What part of your life and identity do you hold on to and follow that you did not get from any human authority (parents, school, friends, boss, or other human source)?

What good is it to know the stories and the Scriptures if we pay no attention to them? *"I must make it clear to you, my friends, that the gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin. I did not take it over from anyone; no one taught it to me; I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."* Yes, well? What about your own declaration of independence from the outer world, and your own claim of allegiance to Jesus Christ? Are we just here to mouth platitudes, or are we really living the New Life in Christ Jesus? The first thing to do, if we want a New Year, is to throw away the human resolutions and get really clear and refocused on our own revelation of Jesus Christ – and on the identity and purpose that we were given from Him.

YOU ARE THE LIGHT

We have some reports of what Jesus said and did and what happened to Him, and also some accounts of His impact on individuals in a number of different situations. These reports are frustratingly brief and incomplete, yet powerful enough to have evolved into sacred Scripture for Christians. By the way, if you call them “Scripture” (or “Holy Bible”) before you are a Christian, that’s just a cultural overlay and doesn’t really mean much more than a nod at common verbal usage.

Paul tries to explain what Jesus’ coming means to us, including to himself. And we now have thousands of books and millions of sermons trying to explain what Paul meant by his explanations of what Jesus meant and means to us. You can add in just about as many layers as you wish. What did I mean by that explanation of what Luther meant, or what Calvin meant, about what Augustine meant, about what Paul meant when he tried to explain what Jesus’ coming meant and means to us? Even so, I am way oversimplifying the situation. I cannot speak of any of this without making it clear, directly or indirectly, that a huge number of people who are giving their explanations are dead wrong, and they would say the same of my explanations. And this has also been going on for two thousand years. Arius against Athanasius, for instance. Paul against James the brother. And what do you think all the “church councils” were about? Nobody writes creeds until they think somebody is telling it wrong. Nobody worries about heresy until they think heretics are leading the people astray. And are you sure that all the church councils got it right?

Many people throw up their hands (and minds) in horror and just want to cut through the maze to a simple, clear, and straightforward approach. Religious “Chopsticks”: let’s just live by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule, and forget all the complicated mess that makes our heads spin. And that sounds really wonderful, until you actually try it.

The glorious thing about this mess is that it reminds us that every sincere Christian must come to some understanding of their own about who Jesus is and what Jesus’ life really means to them. A great deal of what goes under the name of “Christianity” is about what somebody else thinks or what some religious organization thinks Jesus is supposed

to mean to you. That can be incredibly valuable and useful – if you don't stop there.

If you want religious “Chopsticks,” you have to go to the literalist and inerrant fundamentalist approaches. Then it is no longer the Christian Faith; it is the Christian Formula, and everything is simplex and cut-and-dried: You accept Jesus. You were bad before; you are saved now. It's just a matter of waiting for the Second Coming and, in the meantime, telling everybody else the formula so they can be saved too. And if they won't listen, to Hell with them. It sure does make preaching a lot easier. Things are bad ... here's the formula ... get saved. You can apply it to any area or situation in life. Push the button and out it comes.

“Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:12) Paul knows we are not the Savior and cannot save ourselves. So what does this mean? It means that conversion is only for openers. That once we enter the Christian Life, we go on learning, growing, praying, and pondering for the rest of our lives, making it more and more our own. Therefore it is not enough for Paul to explain it. *You* must explain it too. *“You shall worship the Lord your God with all of your mind.”* (Luke 10:27) You cannot claim it or love it until it matters to you so much that *you* also form the images and the explanations, wrestle with the meaning, and try to track where it is leading you and how it is changing the way you live and decide everything. And sometimes you will share that with others who are interested or hungry for the spiritual life. They are everywhere, and some of them want more than just canned phrases. They want to talk to people who actually walk the Path and can speak out of personal experience, and who are not afraid to share doubts and failures as well as the joy and comfort of the Christian Life.

“Work out your own salvation in fear and trembling.” Does that sound like it's all cut-and-dried? One size fits all? Five minutes after you are converted, you know everything there is to know about Jesus and how to get from sinner to saint? If you think the theology trail is long and complex, what about the trail of medicine, physics, geology, or economics? Why is *God* the only subject we think we should be able to grasp fully without any effort – without any confusion or contradiction? Why do we want to believe that no new light or insight will come to

the Christian Faith or belief? And that if it does, it must be wrong, or even evil? Why is it important to pretend that Christianity, alone among all the important areas of life, is the only place where we have never made any mistakes; where we will never need to change our minds about anything; where we can never comprehend anything better, more deeply, more helpfully, or more faithfully than how it was explained two thousand years ago? Meaning, if Paul said it one way, am I automatically damned if I try to comprehend it in any way clearer or more powerful to me? Is it heresy or pride if you try to put some things even better – at least more clearly for you – than he did? Why is this not encouraged instead of being stifled and condemned? If it was faithful for Paul to speak about Jesus with his own best images and understanding, why is it not faithful for us to do that too? In fact, is it not *faithless* if we do not? If we do it, then we could get something authentic from Paul in the New Testament and something authentic from each other too, and use them both as we bring our own faith to as much clarity and conviction and practical application as we possibly can. And then we might also become a living, thriving, dynamic faith community, as alive in our time as Paul was in his. And if we don't do it, then we are doomed to become the typical dead and lifeless church – a religious museum that merely displays artifacts and relics from the past. If you are alive, you have your own understanding. Then there is the delightful possibility that people who come to know you will find not only the witness of the Bible, but the living witness of you and your life in the present – both inviting them into Life in Christ Jesus.

By the way, none of the infant churches Paul started would have survived if they had not moved to this level. And that is why Jesus never wrote anything down – so we would be forced to seek the Living Word, and not get locked down too tightly or too woodenly to the printed word. It is our relationship with the Living Word, with the presence of Jesus Christ – our life with the Holy Spirit – that moves us from “Chopsticks” to the symphony of the Christian WAY. And it is always an unfinished symphony.

“I am astonished to find you turning away so quickly from him who called you by grace, and following a different gospel.” I am well aware that this very verse can be and often has been used to castigate anyone who dares to think or say anything different from what appears on the printed pages of the New Testament. But I am also aware of what a lot of simplex preachers never mention to you: *that Paul never heard*

of the New Testament. None of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John) were written until long after Paul was dead and departed from this realm. Paul's own letters were not yet collected and would not be canonized as Scripture, even by usage, until more than a hundred years after his death. Formal canonization would be closer to two hundred years after his death.

Therefore, Paul cannot be meaning what most preachers want you to think he means. That is, he is not talking about a written-down Gospel. He is talking about a Living Word – a Message embodied in Jesus the Christ. In this letter to the Galatians, Paul is speaking against the rigidity of the religious establishment. He is speaking against the influence of the Jerusalem church that wants to replace the freedom of grace in Christ Jesus and take the Galatian Christians back into the bondage of the rules and regulations of the Law. He is speaking against any influence, anywhere in the world, that wants to substitute the unspeakably wonderful and freeing Message of God's love and acceptance – revealed in Jesus Christ – with any different message that argues against our trusting this love and claiming this relationship that God in Christ Jesus has invited us into. Moreover, Paul knows that if we do not *trust* this love and grace and mercy – and trust it more than anything else in life – we have no chance to experience this New Life. If we do not trust God's love, we will not walk the Christian Path or Way more than a few feet before the world bribes, frightens, threatens, or entices us back into some way of life more compatible with the way the world sees and does things.

When Paul speaks of the Gospel, he is not talking about something as yet unwritten. He is talking about *an experience* of grace and mercy, of being loved and being wanted, of being valued and invited to come help – when there could hardly have been any person less qualified or less deserving than Paul to receive any of these things, especially from Jesus. The Gospel started for Paul on the Damascus Road, and it continued to transform his life thereafter. It was nothing you could put on a printed page. It was the living presence of Jesus the Christ.

Paul not only trusts this Gospel, he trusts that this same Lord will extend to others this same grace, mercy, and love, the reality of being wanted and valued, and the invitation to come help with the mission. Paul thinks he knows Jesus well enough to know that He will do all of this for others too – if they will allow it. So Paul extends the promise and the invitation – the Gospel – to others wherever he goes. We call it his

“missionary journeys” – a weak phrase for what was really happening. And lo and behold, the Holy Spirit of Jesus showed up and made good on Paul’s promises. Many folk were filled with the Holy Spirit – not only in Galatia, but wherever Paul went. And Paul is dumbfounded that after having tasted the personal love and presence of the Spirit, some of the Galatians are turning back to the old fears, restrictions, and demands of the religious institutions of their time.

History repeats itself, at least in theme. And the only thing we ever learn from history is that people never learn from history. In our day and time, the Bible itself is being used, with rigid applications of its printed pages, to frighten hundreds of thousands of people off of the Gospel that Paul preached – off of the Gospel that Jesus lived and died to reveal and proclaim to us. How much of the Christian World today trusts the love of God revealed in Jesus – trusts it so much that they have no fear of Hell; no fear of the condemnation of preachers or church hierarchies; no fear of the Pope or the latest popular televangelist; no fear of the Second Coming or of being “left behind”; no fear of failure, cancer, imprisonment, or death; no fear of scorn, shame, disgrace, or even the betrayal of friends? Do I need to remind you that Jesus feared *none* of these things? Do I need to remind you that Paul came to trust Jesus so much that *he* feared *none* of these things?

Now, in the name of both Paul and Jesus, and in the guise of honoring the printed page, Christians today are taught to fear all these things. How very clever that the Bible, which can be one of the Holy Spirit’s very best tools, has also become one of Satan’s very best tools. Oh yeah, we forgot about The Adversary. Again! Because in our kind of church, even if we read and try to honor the Holy Bible, we consistently pass over, neglect, and delete the part about Satan.

How does the world think? That you must be good before God will love you. That you must be good before God will hear you or answer your prayers. This is the way the world operates; it’s no surprise that it applies it to religion. The world wants to know: What is your collateral? What is your experience? What is your track record? Can you prove ahead of time that we will get a good return if we invest in a relationship with you? If not – if it’s not pretty certain and looking pretty likely – then you are not worth our time or resources. Therefore, the world over, the only way to be sure you deserve love and will “fit in” is to delay your full admission until after you have proven your worth (performance, effectiveness, righteousness, good deeds, whatever). So we have endless rituals for

finding out ahead of time – for trying to minimize the risk of dealing with each other: A job interview. Recommendations from those who have known you from before. Periods of probation – time before tenure or full partnership, or before the contract locks-in for good. Dating is relational probation.

Jesus inverts this. He invests *first*: I believe in you, love you, trust your worth. Here is my life, on the line for you. Yes, you have so much to learn and grow into – so far to come. But we establish the relationship first! Then on the power and confidence of the love I already give you, you will be given eternity to grow into your true self and your true worth. The Damascus Road is only one illustration of this unearthly principle, but it is a great one.

And Paul comments: “*The Gospel you heard me preach is not of human origin.*” Not hardly! Paul had certainly never heard of such an approach before. It is not the way our world thinks or behaves. In fact, it is so far beyond the way our world thinks and behaves that we can barely grasp it – and after that, barely trust it and go with it. It seems so strange, feels so new, impacts us so powerfully that we aren’t sure we heard correctly, and we are forever trying to minimize it and make it safer and more familiar. And even after we decide to trust it, there are countless, endless scenarios where we cannot figure out how to apply it in our own lives. And it always feels like the world will destroy us if we try to do so. Of course, that’s not far from the truth. It is, in fact, so dangerous that we need to pray constantly, and we need to be careful about getting in charge of each other’s lives. I trust the Spirit not to get us killed unless a lot of people will be saved by it – that is, not unless we ourselves would end up being very happy about the results and the trade-off. I don’t know why more Christians do not trust that. Christianity is not about martyrdom except in special circumstances. And many martyrs have gone to their deaths because they took matters into their own hands, instead of seeking the guidance of the Spirit. But perhaps that’s another subject for another time.

All of this leads up to verse 15. I have been trying for two Sundays to get to it. “*But then in his good pleasure, God, who from my birth had set me apart, and who had called me through his grace, chose to reveal his Son in and through me, in order that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.*”

YOU ARE THE LIGHT

How can you sit still?! Is this actually part of the Gospel, or just the repercussions of the Gospel? I guess it doesn't matter. But it sure is one or the other. Do you remember our Christmas Eve service? It was from John's Gospel, but John got many of his basic concepts from Paul. We were lighting candles and tracking from the heights of the Old Testament: from "*I appointed you a light to the nations,*" to the famous Jesus declaration "*I am the light of the world,*" to Jesus' famous commission to His followers: "*YOU are the light of the world.*" We are children of the light – carriers of the light – light-bearers.

So often we try to leave ourselves out of the story. Or we get into it as recipients – grateful, but too humble to be builders of the Kingdom. So many churches, this one included, make it obvious that you can be a "good church member" (whatever that means) without being very deep into the Christian Way and purpose. Maybe even a layman (church member) can help support and make a difference to the life of the church. But a spiritual warrior? An apostle? An honest-to-goodness companion and cohort of the Christ who is helping to build the Kingdom of God? *Children of light ... Message-bearer ... YOU are the light of the world.* And I don't just mean helping to change a tire once or twice a year, putting a few bucks in the offering plate, or being a moral and ethical citizen of the community. Not that I have anything against such activities.

Paul comes to see that God had a destiny for him from long before the Damascus Road made him aware of it. That is mind-blowing to me – and extremely important as I assume and apply that principle to myself, and to all of you as well. But there's more.

We know the theological claims and precepts: "*God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.*" God revealed himself in Jesus Christ – made himself known to us in the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus revealed God to us – as was the intention, plan, and purpose of God. But how many of you know the clincher? How many of you know what closes the loop and activates the whole affair on the level that changes us, uses us, counts us in, and makes us a true and living part of the whole incredible affair?

"God ... chose to reveal his Son in and through me"

Jesus revealed God. Who reveals Jesus? Paul! Who else?

WHO ELSE? YOU!

After the Damascus Road, and being sent to the Gentiles, Paul begins to realize more and more that God has chosen him to reveal Jesus to those who do not know Jesus. And how can this happen? Well, in many ways, if the foundation is in place and real. Christ runs Paul's life. Not perfectly, by the way, but that is clearly and truly Paul's desire and intent. *"It is no longer I, but Christ who lives in me."* Christ Jesus influences, impacts, guides, and directs, and is always in the process of transforming Paul. Those who get to know Paul end up seeing and realizing what Jesus is like and what Jesus is about, because Paul both consciously and unconsciously reveals it. That is what his life is about – what it has come to be about. Paul constantly points beyond himself to Jesus, as Jesus constantly pointed beyond Himself to God. Nevertheless, this "revealing" is what energizes and awakens the light and its Path for others. Look at the record: individual after individual, church after church, comes into the light – comes onto the Path and Way – because Paul reveals it, embodies it, makes it real and possible. Paul is not living the Life because he is a great theologian; he is a great theologian because he is living the Life.

We are not talking about doing some good deeds, though clearly Paul did some along the way. And no man was more hated than Paul in his day, even as he was also well loved. That was also true of and consistent with the Lord and Savior he followed. But Paul was dealing all the time not just with the theory, but with the actual impact and reality of Jesus' purpose and mission: to save us; to transform us; to change us from within; to set us free from sin and death – the bondage of this broken world; to make us fearless; to make us confident in God's love, and in eternal life.

God chose to reveal himself in Jesus the Christ. Jesus revealed God. Who reveals Jesus in our day and time? Not Paul; he has been called away. Who then? You then! And if you do not, a lot of other people will – including many who have no idea what they are talking about, and who remake Jesus into an ugly and vengeful prototype of their own inner shadow. You have been given spiritual credentials, that God may reveal his Son in and through you.

THE FULL TRUTH OF THE GOSPEL

Part of my hope is that I can intrigue you into reading Galatians more often than any other book in the Bible. This is not because Galatians is better than the others, but because it is the fastest way to get recentered. In six chapters, Galatians reminds us of the core of the core of the Gospel. It is the heroin of the New Testament. In ten minutes we can get our fix, and then we won't be any good in the world for another five days. An unlovely analogy, except we might be very good in the Kingdom during that time, at least until Galatians starts to wear off again.

Galatians also leads us into many issues and items beyond its six chapters. Balanced with its brevity is the chance to explore and expand our understanding until we simply run out of time. There is endless controversy, for example, about the discrepancy between Galatians 2 and Acts 15. Both speak of a Jerusalem Council, but describe the proceedings in very different terms. Many assumptions – about Paul's character, the issues of the early church, and the nature of the theological struggles taking place – rest upon this comparison between Galatians 2 and Acts 15.

To the disgust of my liberal colleagues (at least those who still speak to me), I think Galatians 2 matches an earlier Jerusalem visit mentioned in Acts 11. If Peter visited Antioch about the time of Acts 12 – which I am told is silly but which I think is quite plausible – then everything fits much better. Only, that would also make the dating of these writings much earlier than modern liberal scholars consider possible. (By the way, for all my comments about liberal scholars, I still pay attention to them because many of them try to consider all the evidence. Conservative scholars come to their conclusions first, and then only gather evidence to support what they already assume has to be true. That may be entertaining but, like watching a juggling act, gets increasingly boring after the first fifteen minutes. Over the last twenty-five years, it has seemed to me that more and more liberal scholars are taking the same approach, only from the opposite perspective. Assumptions that everything in the Bible has to be false are no better than assumptions that everything in the Bible has to be true.)

I think Paul was martyred in Rome, under Nero, around 61 A.D. Then Luke, having lost his friend and spiritual father, decided his best

contribution would be to write an account of what was known of Jesus and what was happening to His church. So he wrote Luke and Acts around 62-64 A.D. Acts does not end; it just stops. So I wonder if Luke was also martyred before he finished his book. (Nero ruled from 54-68 A.D.) I also think that Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians from Antioch at the end of his first missionary journey, around 48 A.D. Most of the scholars I trust say it was more likely from Ephesus around 52 A.D.

In many churches, nobody would care about such details. But well over half of our congregation is participating in formal Bible study every week, and many of you track such things – if not with agreement, at least with interest. The holocaust that destroyed Israel between 67-70 A.D. was so terrible that we might expect more comment from books written anywhere near that time. The solution has been to push the dates back into the 90s (A.D.) or later, so that the destruction of Jerusalem will no longer be newsworthy. A more likely explanation is that the synoptic Gospels were written *before* this shattering event, and so they are silent on the subject except for Jesus' warnings that it is coming.

In any case, we have some fascinating biographical material in Galatians. Paul is telling his Galatian friends that the Gospel is not of human origin. To support this claim, and to our delight, he mentions some of his own personal history. After his conversion, he headed off to Arabia without even going through Jerusalem. Two chapters later, in another connection, Paul mentions that Mount Sinai is in Arabia. That is not our geography, but it IS his! It is more than likely, then, that Paul headed for the holiest place on earth in his tradition: Mount Sinai, where Moses and Elijah and Jesus and many others went when they needed to sort through incredible events, regroup, and get their lives back together before going back into the world. Then Paul returned to Damascus.

Three years later, Paul went to Jerusalem to get to know Peter and stayed two weeks with him. Don't we wish we had tape recordings of those conversations! Paul also met with James, the Lord's brother – a meeting between the theological Mutt and Jeff of the New Testament. Then Paul went back to Tarsus, his home town, and we hear nothing further of him for nine or ten years. Next, Paul is traveling from Antioch to Jerusalem with Barnabas and Titus, who is an uncircumcised Greek. Paul and Barnabas have been working together in Antioch – before the first missionary journey – and Gentiles have been flocking to the church at Antioch. Of course, there is a big issue over Titus not being circumcised.

There is also a big controversy about whether or not Gentile converts had to begin obeying all the other Jewish laws and customs in order to be members of the church.

After the first missionary journey, in a more formal Jerusalem Council mentioned in Acts 15, the atmosphere will be more toward bringing unity out of the growing rift between the Jewish and Gentile ministries. At this earlier, less formal confrontation (before the first missionary journey), the conclusion is that Paul is a legitimate Apostle to the Gentiles, and no restrictions are laid upon him except that he is to remember the poor. Paul had come to Jerusalem with an offering for the poor from Antioch, and they want him to keep on bringing them more. And as you know, he did.

Peter, you remember, had paved the way for the Gentiles to be included in the Christian Movement by telling about his vision and by what had happened between him and Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. (Acts 10) So Paul and his group think they have won approval, but it does not appear to be an official gathering – just conversations and arguments, and maybe everyone goes home convinced of their own opinions.

Paul and Barnabas, and presumably Titus, return to Antioch, taking John Mark with them. Clearly the ferment and excitement of the growing faith is now in Antioch, and soon Peter comes to visit. But shortly after, so do a number of men from the Jerusalem church – friends and representatives of James. They don't like how things were left at the Council, and they come to see what the church at Antioch is really like. They suspect it has grown far more kooky than Paul and Barnabas had represented back in Jerusalem. Indeed it has! Jews and Gentiles are all mixed in together – eating at the Lord's Table together, breaking bread together – therefore breaking tradition, breaking Torah, breaking every practice sacred to Judaism.

For just a moment, consider the position of Paul's opponents. Circumcision was the symbol, the mark, the emblem of the Covenant between God and the Jewish People. From Abraham, from Moses, for two thousand years, circumcision was the mark and pledge of the Covenant Promises – the sign of the Chosen People; a sign in the flesh, in the most personal place possible – a constant reminder that everything must be dedicated to God, from the smallest individual act to the choices and behavior of the entire community. And now we are going to toss it

all away because some deluded young rabbi thinks he has seen a vision? Two thousand years of prophets, priests, and kings against one man's fantasy that he has had an encounter with Jesus, long after the legitimate apostles had seen the Resurrected Lord!? So now we are going to abandon Judaism outright? Does that make any sense to you?! So they come storming into Antioch. They love Jesus, but they love a thoroughly Jewish Jesus – according to their own convictions about what that means.

Under their cold stares and sincere concerns and arguments, the Jewish Christians become increasingly uncomfortable. Suddenly the love and joy of the Lord's Table starts to feel very different. Some of the Jewish Christians find themselves unable to make the meetings. Urgent responsibilities call them away. Finally Peter and even Barnabas hold back and stop sharing in the meals. The fellowship is falling apart, and the rift is established and growing wider. Have you ever been in a church fight?

But who is *Paul* to confront Peter? Peter was chief apostle among the twelve. Peter had walked with Jesus from the first. Peter had heard the preaching, seen the encounters, and witnessed the healings. Moreover, Peter had been especially trained by Jesus Himself, and was one of Jesus' closest friends. He was clearly and specifically chosen by Jesus to carry on the mission and to strengthen the other apostles in that task. And Paul? Paul had never walked with Jesus. Paul had hated Jesus and His entire Movement. Paul had been ringleader of the opposition, present at the stoning of Steven, and instrumental in getting Christians arrested, punished, even killed. And now, fifteen years (or so) after the crucifixion, Paul is going to tell *Peter* how things are supposed to be: what Jesus really wants; what Jesus is really about; what Jesus' church is supposed to look like and be like?

Well, that's what happens! "*When Cephas [Aramaic for "rock," which is "Peter" in Greek] came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong.*" (Galatians 2:11) Don't beat around the bush, Paul; come right out and say what you mean. But I also love it when, in verse 15, Paul shifts to "we"; I hope it reflects the actual conversation. Paul suddenly shifts from the accusation of hypocrisy, however accurate, and speaks personally to Peter: "Hey friend, we're both Jews, not Gentiles. And yet we know that no one is ever justified by doing what the Law requires. We have been there, done that! Only through faith in Christ Jesus did we find life. So now

we have put our faith in Jesus Christ. Why then – how then – can we possibly maintain the old ways and illusions? Shall we start building up again what we know never worked for us in the first place? We are all in the same boat, Jew and Gentile alike, and Jesus is the only one who can see us through this storm.”

Paul, of course, is recounting to the Galatians what happened. Peter was man enough, and Christian enough, to see his error and side with Paul – and, from our perspective, not really with Paul but with Jesus. The Gentiles were IN: *in* on the fellowship of the Christian Faith, and *in* all the way. Judaism could not save them; only Jesus could.

How hard it is to change our minds about truth we grew up with – truth that has been accepted all around us for as far back as we can remember: The Bible is inerrant. Mary was a virgin. Jesus was only nice while on earth, but now He’s coming back soon to judge, condemn, punish, and slaughter. Jesus hates rich people and likes it best if you stay unmarried and never have sex. If you are a really good Christian, God will reward you by making you healthy, wealthy, and wise, and others will be “left behind.”

Behind all the details and beyond all the context, I am amazed at Paul’s clarity and courage. “*I was determined that the full truth of the gospel should be maintained for you.*” How grateful I am. And how I hope that all of you are grateful too. I have the distinct impression that but for Paul, the full truth of the Gospel would have been watered down, compromised – lost in the efforts to keep harmony in the moment at the expense of the full truth. And I cannot escape the conclusion that Paul is unrelenting precisely because for him this is not just theory; it is personal, and connected with personal experience. This is not a written-down Gospel. After all, Paul was every bit as much a Jew as those who were sent by James and Jerusalem. Paul understood them and where they were coming from with complete and total familiarity. They felt no loyalty to the traditions of their ancestors that Paul could not double. They had no allegiance to God or to Torah or to the Chosen People that Paul could not cover in spades. They doubtless knew the Jewish Scriptures, but Paul knew them better. Paul was not afraid of them because they came with nothing Paul had not pondered, studied, agonized over, and prayed over for ten long years. Only, they did not know what Paul knew and had personally experienced: That Jesus had come out of this very tradition – out of all of this allegiance and prophecy

and love of God and honoring of the Covenant – only to carry it beyond what anybody had seen or imagined before. And that Jesus set it all in the light of a love from God beyond what anybody had believed before. Jesus was Jewish, but in Him Judaism itself was transformed and extended.

New wine in old wineskins bursts the wineskins. New light in old concepts and expressions does the same. No man ever loved God or the prophets or the Jewish Scriptures more than Jesus. But the very purity and strength of His love and allegiance blew it all into new dimensions:

Love first, and then obedience as a response. *Not* obedience first, and then love as a reward.

God's Kingdom first, and then all success and reward and pleasure in its wake. *Not* success in the world first, and then give God and his Kingdom whatever is left over after that.

Prayer first, and then all decisions, goals, values, and behavior shaped from the guidance of the Holy Spirit. *Not* get your life all set up first, and then pray afterward for God to come and bless it and help you to make it work.

Have no fear of this world, because this world is not in tune with God, and because the Life to come is far more important. *Not* be as faithful as you can until the world around you doesn't like it, and then backtrack, compromise, retreat, or go hide.

Almost everything that is familiar to us is reversed in the light of a true relationship with the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ.

Once again, for Paul this is not mere theory or concept. This is personal experience. The light of the Damascus Road had shown him how blind he had been. And now that he sees a whole New Life – and knows the living presence of the Savior who revealed it – he is not willing to let it ooze away in compromises, rationalizations, or even in fierce controversy. *“I was determined that the full truth of the gospel should be maintained for you.”* The full truth of the Life you can have with the presence of Jesus by your side is too precious to give away, even if James and Jerusalem don't like it. Even if somebody *you* know doesn't like it. And minor though it seems, eating together with whoever wants to come to Jesus is one of the marks of His New Kingdom.

Paul also knows, from personal experience, that you cannot have the New Life without giving up the old. How many friends and relatives had he lost? How much reputation as a brilliant young rabbi did he lose? From a very conscientious beginning, from being successful beyond his peers, from a budding career in which he was becoming more and more prominent among his people, Paul went into sudden and total eclipse. It all went in that flash of light. His only possible friends were now those he was about to arrest and get killed. Nothing would ever again be the same for Paul. He understands about having to give up the old in order to claim and go with the new.

But he also knows that the new is far more beautiful and powerful and lasting. And he is not stingy. He wants it for *everybody*. People without the Gospel seem lost to him – frightened, cut back, held down. Even if they seem to be doing well, as he had himself, they seem timid and contained, and everything is so partial and temporary. He speaks often of bondage – the bondage of Satan, of this world, and even of the Law that can never be lived well enough. The Law is like a one-armed bandit: full of authentic treasure, but it never pays off; a few coins now and again, but never the jackpot. God is the jackpot. With the Gospel, you get the jackpot *first*, and then get to move on together to other things.

What if somebody knew how to preach the full truth of the Gospel to everyone in our country, and what if we could actually hear it and receive it? What if suddenly, between today and tomorrow, each individual here knew with absolute certainty that they were children of light – fully loved, totally valued, and fully freed from this world – unafraid of anything anybody could do to them in this world? Remember, “*Do not fear him who kills the body, and after that, has nothing else that he can do.*” There would be a bloodless revolution to shake the country to its core.

But what happens everywhere in our country is that we have the Gospel at half strength or at quarter strength. Everywhere there are compromises. Therefore the responses are also at half strength or quarter strength. We believe in the love of Jesus and put our trust in Him. But only sort of ... and only part of the time. So where do we really put our trust? What do we really count on? Where does our hope really reside? God cannot drive if we will not move over. We always want God to show us first, but how can God show us if we will not let him direct our lives?

And so Paul's words spring to life once again: *"I have been crucified with Christ; the life I now live is not my life, but the life Christ lives in me."*

Why? *"I trust the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself up for me."* So Paul will not hedge, quit, or back down on the full truth of the Gospel. Just like, from now on, none of *us* are going to, right? *"I will not nullify the grace of God."* I will not retract, apologize for, water down, compromise, or time-share the grace of God.

And then we feel the fire – not the fires of Hell, just the fire of Paul's passion and conviction: *"If righteousness comes by law, then Christ died for nothing."* It is no longer simple. If Moses is sufficient, Jesus is unnecessary. If you want to go back to Moses, to Torah, to the traditions and customs of your ancestors, you can do that. But you will lose Christ. Once you see the new, you cannot go back to the old without losing the new. The Galatian Christians are in a hard place. If Jesus really is Messiah and Son of God, then trusting in the old ways to save them means they cannot come with Jesus. Which do *you* trust? If you trust the Law – if you can get righteous by any way other than by tracking the sheer mercy and grace of God in Christ Jesus – then go for it. But if so, then Jesus' life and death and resurrection were unnecessary – silly and pointless; He came for nothing, and He died for nothing.

So what is your witness? What is your choice? Whom do *you* trust?

THROWING IT AWAY

Life does not always get better. Not all of us “*Increase in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man.*” (Luke 2:52) At least not all of us do that all of the time. We do not always move forward, becoming wiser and more effective in an unbroken line. Choices sometimes lead us into decay or disaster. The Roman Empire, like many empires before her, evolved into ever greater disunity, weakness, and decay, plunging the western world into darkness, or at least what we call “The Dark Ages.”

Such things are of little interest except to historians, and perhaps to a few others who are interested in what trends and processes may be going on in our own time. But as you all know, there are principles and patterns that go on at every level of life. *Individuals* can also grow strong and effective, and then move into periods of disintegration and decay. Some of us experience our own “Dark Ages.” And sometimes we move out of them into renewal and renaissance.

I am not referring to the natural process of aging or to disasters that sometimes destroy us from without. Such things also happen. This is a temporal world. We all know we are moving toward some earthly end. But for every person who is destroyed by earthquake, wind, fire, or flood, a thousand others move into deterioration or decay due to their own inner attitudes and choices. Sometimes individuals, churches, businesses, corporations, even nations perish through no fault of their own. But most of the time, in most instances, we are destroyed from within more than we are destroyed from without.

The divorce rate, we are told, is near fifty percent. This does not mean that half of all married people get divorced; if a quarter of them get divorced twice, we get the same statistic. In one of the best marriages I ever saw, both parties were on their fifth try. But it was about more than finding each other; they had both come out of their “Dark Ages” and were doing it differently. Nevertheless, when a marriage fails, is it because of external pressures and problems? Those certainly can be difficult. But external problems only enhance and magnify the internal problems, which in turn destroy the marriage bond. I think maybe one percent of marriages are destroyed from external circumstances only, because I have known so many couples who have survived nearly every known list of reasons for why a marriage couldn’t work. And they

didn't merely survive in some meaningless truce, but found a love-bond that revived into joy and gratitude greater than ever.

Most of the time, in most instances, we are destroyed from within far more than we are destroyed from without. This is very disconcerting, especially when we know that we live in a culture that spends the majority of its time and energy trying to fix external problems, and even trying to fix internal problems externally. Drug 'em up, or beat 'em up, or lock 'em up, or kill 'em. How brilliant. Aren't we glad we live in the enlightened twenty-first century?

One of the most fascinating aspects of human nature is that we can find something good, something wonderful, something we ourselves claim as a great boon and blessing – claim it, incorporate it into our lives, rejoice in its benefits – and then after a while, throw it away. Is there anyone here so incredibly stupid that, having once kicked a bad habit, they ended up returning to it? Is there anyone here so unbelievably ridiculous that, having once discovered a really helpful habit, they then neglected it and let it go? It's no wonder we have trouble believing God could love us.

Over and over, people have come out of prayer retreats and, after only a few days, are amazed at what the presence of God is accomplishing in their lives. Problems and concerns that had baffled them for years begin to melt away. Life takes on a new brightness, clarity, purpose. But four or five months later I ask how it's going, and they confess that they have grown too busy or distracted. The light has faded, and they tell me that they are back to truly praying maybe once or twice a month. And they also tell me that life is not as bright and good as it was when they were praying daily. "You stupid Galatians!" comes to mind. Only, then we have to try to make it through the guilt trap. Whipping yourself is not a good substitute for prayer. Just get back to it. God has no need to punish us further; we have already taken care of that. He just wants us back. (Happily, every time some "stupid Galatian" leaves my office, I say "sorry, Lord" and get back to my own prayers. If there weren't so many of you reminding me, I fear I would do worse than any of you.)

In any case, it is not just learning; it is learning over and over again. It is not just waking up; it is waking up over and over again. It is not just getting converted; it is the constant need for renewal – for re-conversion. "Two steps forward, one step back," we sometimes say. And that's on a good day. "I don't need to rewrite a Covenant every year. Joined the

church twenty-five years ago, and that should be enough. Half-lied about it then, and haven't taken very much of it seriously since."

Well, that is not what we really want to be like. Life keeps confronting us with choices and options, so we continually have the chance to wake up to our real intentions, and to the choices we are making that confirm or deny them.

So Paul is not being weird here in the Galatians letter. His friends were going back to their old familiar ways of thinking and doing. And if they didn't realize it – if they didn't wake up to their backsliding (an interesting old image; do you remember it?) – they would lose everything they had found.

Of course, they were under duress. That is, people with authority – people in positions of respect and prominence in their old familiar life – were telling them that they were wrong; that Jesus could not bring them any such newness of life; that their well-being both in the present and in the future depended upon their adhering to the familiar ways they had been taught since childhood. Torah (the laws of Moses) was God's will, and no other way of life could ever work or please God.

For a little while they had been deluded. For a little while they had listened to Paul tell about a crucified and Risen Lord: a man sent by God, with credentials from God beyond anything the world had imagined before; a man with the power to teach and heal and move and change people beyond belief. And He came insisting that God cared about each of us; that God knew us each personally and had destiny and plans for us stretching from the present moment into eternity; that in fact God loved us – loved us more, far more, than anyone had ever imagined before, or ever dared even to contemplate. And that this love was there even if we made mistakes, got lost, or hurt ourselves or each other. And that if we would respond to it, God could turn our lives around and set them on a better Path than we had ever known before, even if things were going terribly wrong all around us.

Then the hard part and the best part came almost together. This Messenger from God was killed because His Message was too new and too threatening to be endured by earthly authorities. And He would do nothing to prevent them from displaying their hatred and fear of Him. It was necessary, He said, for the world to show its true colors, or no one would ever truly repent and turn to be saved.

But then the best part closely followed. Death could not hold Him! The power of God was revealed in His Resurrection from the dead. He began to reveal Himself alive to those who had walked with Him, and then to those who were close to those who had walked with Him. And Paul, we know, would add his own story: that sometimes He even revealed Himself to those who had been His worst enemies, if their hearts were willing.

Only, here it is important to notice a crucial reversal. Historically speaking, the Cross comes first, and then the Resurrection. Spiritually speaking, the Resurrection comes first, and then the Cross. It has always been so. Even for the first followers, the Cross was only heartbreak and sadness – until after the Resurrection. It was only after the Resurrection that people saw the Cross in its true light. After the Resurrection, people realized Jesus' true power and identity. Therefore it was *after* the Resurrection that they realized the true magnitude of the Cross – both in Jesus' willingness to go there *and* in His refusal to coerce or destroy those who sent Him there or punish those who betrayed or deserted Him along the way. It is the Resurrection that reveals the Cross, not the other way around. The disciples looked back after the Resurrection and saw the Cross in new light. They saw all they had and had not done to help Jesus – saw all their love, and also all their perfidy, in a light too clear for words. And it was in that “after the Resurrection” remorse and repentance that they found a far deeper forgiveness and a greater New Life.

Remember the Last Breakfast? The disciples had to be reinstated and recommissioned before they could realize that after having blown it so badly, they were still invited to be followers and apostles. And it is after the Resurrection that *we* go to the Cross and find our own sin revealed (our own alienation and rebellion from God). We also look at the Cross – knowing Jesus' true identity because of the Resurrection – and then we also see in clear light all the ways we have not lived for God or been true and loyal followers of the Christ. Then our pretense is dashed. Our hopes of being good or virtuous or acceptable apart from Him are utterly destroyed. It is after the Resurrection – seeing Him for who He really is – that we look back at the Cross and find true repentance: our hearts broken, and therefore finally open.

And so this Message had been carried to the Galatians. “But you don't have to take my word for it,” Paul would add. You can discover it for yourselves. Open the gate of your own heart and soul – take down

the shields of fear and dread and anger toward God. He is waiting for you even now. Open your heart to him and you will receive the Holy Spirit of this Resurrected Christ, even here and now. And you will experience for yourselves what it is like to live life with His presence beside you, within you, all day, every day. If you want, you too can receive the Holy Spirit. Of course, you also must repent – you must want this New Life more than anything else in this world. It never comes separate from the Resurrection – and the Cross it reveals.

It is unlikely that Paul was able to reveal very much of this to the Galatian communities in ten or twenty minutes. We think the letter to the Galatians was written for young Christians in Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe. How many weeks or months Paul spent on his first visit to this area we cannot tell. But soon enough, people were responding enough to get him beaten, thrown out of town, stoned, and left for dead in Lystra. The love of God is a hard Message to carry. A love that changes your life inside and out is always a threat to whatever life you have been living so far. (Remember, this is not “love” by our typical definitions.) Even more so if that life has gone under the flag of already being responsible and moral, reflecting good citizenship, and doing things pretty much as good as could be expected, and better than most. So Paul was treated much the same way Jesus had been, as he carried the same Message more and more.

In any case, a growing number of people were listening to Paul. Inevitably some of them got too close to the wire and found themselves wondering if his Message was true. And the Spirit, ever watchful, was eager to respond to any authentic invitation, however imperfect. So faith communities sprang up wherever the Message sank in.

But as we said, it is also possible to throw it away. Paul had moved on from the area – first to heal from the stoning, then to get on with other tasks to which the Spirit was calling him. And so the Galatian Christians now needed to maintain their new relationship with the Holy Spirit even though Paul was gone. Paul had not been the source, and he never claimed to be. They needed to be faithful themselves – with constant prayer, study, strengthening of each other, and of course obedience to the Spirit’s guidance – or it would all begin to fade. And on the outside, as always, people they once respected were telling them they were wrong – that they were offending God, were

endangering their children, were traitors to Judaism (or the American Way), and all the rest. Need I translate?

Well, we too have been given a New Life in Christ Jesus, have we not? Is it just words? Was it just something important to Paul and to Galatian villagers of long ago? Are we not also still coming out of “the world” as it operates around us, and moving into a very different plane of existence? Christ alive – and in contact with us! And can we still throw it away, even after all we have experienced of His grace and forgiveness and love?

“You stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you?” We are amused by this comment, in a way. Paul is so honest and straightforward. Yet he knew that the Galatians were throwing away the best thing that would ever happen to them. He is not being politically correct or using good psychology. But he is passionate, and underneath is a true caring that comes from the True Source. And so the Galatian Christians apparently did not take offense, but instead realized that Paul was telling them the truth. They were losing the best News and the best LIFE they had ever heard about. And they really had begun to experience it. What could they be thinking?! Why had they started to head back to the old ways? Was it merely because other humans were pressuring them?

So Paul rescued the churches with this letter. Can that letter still speak with clarity and power enough to keep us from abandoning our faith? Having tasted the mercies of Christ, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the love of God, are we willing to throw it away? Are we willing to:

- trade back the spiritual – for the material?
- trade back our baptism in the Holy Spirit – for the Virgin Birth?
- trade back LOVE – for good deeds (that is, the disciplines of Christian love for the appearance of a generic charity)?
- trade back our Resurrected Lord (a Spiritual Messiah) – for a Second Coming tyrant?
- trade back an authentic faith family (*ecclesia* – fellowship of pilgrims) – for institutional religion (religious hierarchies, creeds, denominational agencies and programs)? “Institutions exist for the painless extinction of the ideas which gave them birth.” (An old Quaker saying.)

THROWING IT AWAY

Do we know the difference yet between LIVING THE LIFE and doing churchy stuff – “playing church,” like when we were kids we used to “play house”? A living relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ is in constant renewal and change and the excitement of personal application. If we still live by the Law, then what we *do* matters most. If we live by the Gospel, then what we *are* matters most. That is the terrifying thing about a relationship with God in Christ Jesus. What can you *do* for leverage to make yourself necessary, important, valuable? What are God’s needs, that we might fill them and become indispensable? How scary for children of earth to be confronted with *relationship*, where worth cannot be attached to behavior. Oh to be sure, behavior reflects what we truly care about. But in relationship, that comes after. It is aftermath and never the source. This haunts us, doesn’t it? *“God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:8)

We have to come in out of the Law – and all other human demands and judgments about approval and performance and behavior – before, prior to, ahead of our ever being able to believe that we are being loved, accepted, blessed, or guided by God. The world has never believed it. The world does not believe it still. You have received it and experienced it. And you are supposed to take it to whomever you can find who is willing to receive it. Only, in the meantime, do not throw it away!

DID YOU RECEIVE THE SPIRIT?

Paul wrote many letters that have not been preserved, but among those we have, I think Galatians was the first, and everybody knows it was *one* of the first. Though it doesn't matter (content matters, and truth matters), Galatians may well be the earliest writing in the New Testament – the very first written words we have about Jesus, His people, His mission and message, His church. That doesn't impress some people very much, not even enough to make them want to read Galatians. But stuff like that moves me. In this case, when I do read it, I am even more enthralled.

I have told you that Galatians is the best fast-fix in the New Testament. I do not claim that it is better or superior to all the other writings, only that its six brief chapters – coupled with Paul's concern for the churches he had started on his first missionary journey – make Galatians the earliest and most accessible fast summary we have of Christian faith and belief. So what about Philipians, or Colossians, or First Thessalonians, which by the way is another contender for being Paul's first letter? They each have even fewer chapters than Galatians. Well, I forbid you to read the other letters in order to figure out why I am suggesting you read Galatians the most. (Hey, it works for Catholics; I thought I'd try it.) Anyway: Read Galatians constantly until it becomes, in the old phrase, as familiar as the back of your hand. And when days seem hard or issues confusing, I hope you will turn to it and, mixed with prayer, find renewal.

In recent sermons I have tried to hint at some of the treasures contained in Galatians. Last week we were in the third chapter, and of course the sermon was far longer than the chapter. Even so, there was much we skipped over lightly. Today I want to back up to the early verses of the third chapter so we can take time to listen to a key question – a critical question – that Paul asks us: “*Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?*” (verse 2)

Perhaps we should even back up to the first part of that question: *Did you receive the Spirit?* After all, if we have not received the Spirit, there is no way we can track the rest of Paul's question. As you know, some churches still equate receiving the Spirit with speaking in tongues

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of ecstasy. I do not. If some individuals find this experience a satisfying further manifestation of receiving the Spirit, why would any of us complain? Still, we don't want to confuse sideshows – or side effects – with main events. If we do, we get sidetracked and end up with cheap shots that actually obscure what matters. Then we get people thinking they haven't received the Spirit because the sky didn't fall in or because they didn't experience some particularly dramatic emotional high in some particular way.

Did you receive the Spirit? Rephrase: Are you aware of the presence of the Living Christ in your own life? Do you receive the guidance, comfort, correctives, confidence, assurance of God's love for you because Jesus is part of your life – a real *being* in active relationship with you? "Spirit" is shorthand for the Holy Spirit, alias the risen and present Spirit of Jesus the Messiah, our crucified and Risen Lord.

Can we all agree that Jesus did not come here – did not live His life, die on a cross, and rise again – merely because He wanted us to speak in tongues? That kind of thing is okay, maybe, as a side effect. Even Paul suggests that you should do it in the privacy of your own home and not mess up the worship services with it. (I Corinthians 14) Speaking in tongues is not *our* experience of ecstasy, though certainly we have our moments of ecstasy – times when we are so filled with gratitude and appreciation and love for Jesus that it goes off all the charts. But that also is a side effect. Jesus comes because He wants to be part of our lives. And, we suspect, because He knows that without Him, our lives are not filled with joy, love, meaning, or purpose, at least not the kind that lasts. Worse than that, doing things our own way goes quickly into the negative side of the ledger. Now, you might say that even *with* Him, that happens far too often. And you would be right. But without Him ... well, some of us call it depression, some of us call it despair, some of us call it Hell on earth. But my real point is that when we speak of receiving the Spirit, some of you instantly wonder if you are disqualified from the question because you do not speak in tongues. I guess you have friends who insist that this is so. So I find it necessary to insist, backed by Scripture, that it is not so – not even close. There is the thirteenth chapter, as well as the fourteenth, of First Corinthians: "*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and have not love*" – meaning, if I do not know and receive the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus – I am what? Nothing! Noisy gong – clanging cymbal – "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." (*Macbeth*) Tongues by themselves are nothing. And by the way, do you think Paul

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is talking about *our love* in this famous passage? That would only be another way to trade Gospel for Law. Yet that's what most people think when they read or hear it. *Our love* is going to save the world? Maybe you think so, but you can be absolutely certain that is not what Paul is talking about. He is talking about Christ's love, and how that must fill us – not about something we can whomp up within ourselves, all by ourselves.

Did you receive the Spirit? This is not an academic or theoretical question. Have you turned your life over to the influence, guidance, and authority of the Risen Christ who is alive and eager to be in continual dialogue with you? This is still the hottest and most important question in the life of the church. It always has been. It was the very issue that was getting Paul into so much hot water all through his ministry. It was the primary reason for Jesus' coming, and the culmination of His life and ministry on earth. *“Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”* (John 16:7)

I do not carry the Message nearly as effectively as Jesus or Paul or Peter – of course – and the proof is that I am still alive. But I can still tell you that this question is at the root of every church battle and fight that I have ever been in. Some people want to turn the church into a minor social club without serious commitment or purpose. Others want to take it back to reliance on some form of the Law, where the focus is on outer behavior or outer causes. Either way destroys the church – one from hypocrisy, the other from Pharisaism. The question is: *Did you receive the Spirit?* Is the Living Christ in charge of your life? If so, then your major purpose is *not* to speak in tongues, but to follow His guidance, walk the Path, be part of His WAY. And your major concern, beyond being faithful yourself, is helping others to claim their own relationship with the Living Christ. That's because you can think of nothing that would so bless them, help them, and fill their lives with joy and purpose as knowing Jesus. If you love somebody, you want the best *you* have found in life to be part of their lives too.

Christians need to learn to be patient, discerning, and careful about how they go marching in to control or judge or manipulate other people's lives. Among other things, Jesus was very careful about such things. He put it out there and then waited for authentic response. Jesus never strong-armed anybody. That's how we know that the Second Coming, as usually presented today, is an atrocity and a satanic lie.

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Going to the Cross and then throwing people into eternal torment are not two sides of the same coin. They are totally contradictory. “I love you, so I will punish you forever in the worst agony I can devise because you wouldn’t receive my love.” Maybe humans love that way. God does not. When will the Christian world rise up and throw out this unforgivable smear on Christ’s love? Especially when we can track how humans brought it back in *after* Jesus lived and died and rose again to throw it out!

Did you receive the Spirit? The promise is that if we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit – if we invite Christ to lead and guide us; if we offer obedience; if we take down the barriers of pride, fear, mistrust, and anger that stand between us – we will receive the Holy Spirit. We will begin to experience the love and caring – and the very special power and perspective – of the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. And this experience will keep expanding and influencing more and more dimensions in our lives, unless we back away or shut down the channels between us. It is not just a story about “back then.” It is not just for biblical heroes or for special people destined to be “saved.” The promise is for everyone. The Spirit is yours if you will have it. We do not need special music, great sermons, or somebody designing powerful emotional settings – though if they help, we are grateful. All we really need are willing hearts.

So, if we have received the Spirit, then we get to hear Paul’s real question: *Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?*

How quickly and simply that brings everything back into focus. The summer of my sixth-grade year, I had a startling encounter with the Spirit realm. It changed my life forever. Most of you have heard the story. My response, consistent with the background I grew up in, was to commit myself to disciplines of hard work and moral behavior as stringent as I could come up with. Nothing illogical about that. As Paul keeps telling us, the Law is fine in its purpose. But I was too young to learn from Paul, Luther, Augustine, or Jesus. So I got to experience for myself the fruits of focusing on the Law. Eleven years later, halfway through seminary, the Spirit came for me again. Sure enough, by this time I was so focused on behavior, self-righteousness, and the judgments which inevitably come with focusing on the Law, that the revelation of grace and mercy and love was so startling to me that it literally blasted my life apart. I had never understood the Damascus Road before then,

and have never had any trouble understanding it since. My disciplines and my efforts to be “good” and acceptable to God, all of them logical, appropriate, defensible, and justifiable as “good Christian behavior,” had become a barrier – thick, wide, and high – between me and Christ, and between me and other human beings. I was particularly annoyed toward all those who were not trying as hard as I was, which, from my perspective, was just about everybody. And the ones who *were* trying as hard as I was, I couldn’t stand either. But I hadn’t figured that out yet. (After all, if your hope for God’s love is based on being good, then others who look good are not necessarily friends. They are the competition; they are a threat; they might make you look bad. If somebody else is doing better and your hope of love is based on performance or accomplishment, then why would God love YOU?)

So, in response to that first special revelation – the caring of the Spirit to reach out and touch my life – I became a self-righteous prick. That is what concentration on the Law does to us. “Lily white, and clothed in light – and deaf, and dumb, and blind.” Blind especially to Christ’s grace and mercy ... and therefore to the love He can bring to life within us. There is a reason for the association between blindness and the Damascus Road.

Oh, I admit it: Satan still uses the standard temptations of carelessness toward greed, lust, sloth, pride, and the rest of the Seven Deadly Sins to cause mayhem in the church. But Satan’s greatest tool for destroying the church is the jealousy, by people who are trying to be good, of other people’s goodness. By the way, that is also one of the Seven Deadly Sins. It’s called “envy.” The church is mostly oblivious to this danger. That is because people think envy is about cars, houses, jobs, money, or good looks. How typical to focus on outer stuff that we can handle, and miss the real danger.

Back to Paul’s question: *Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?* Doing good and being good have always been the world’s solution to a better life. It certainly seems like it ought to work. What could possibly be wrong with trying to be good and do good? Isn’t that what it’s all about?

Jesus died on the Cross so you could try harder to be good and do good? Is *that* what you hear and know? If so, as Paul said: Christ died for nothing. (Galatians 2:21) Strangely enough, our own experience supports the truth of the New Testament message. Focusing on doing

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good and being good has always taken us further and further away from the Spirit. Spirit is about relationship. Relationship is based on love. And while love can be the source of behavior, behavior is never the source of love. Many other things can be the source of behavior too, but behavior is never the source of anything. So if love is not the source, you can be sure that something else is. That is why the Gospel of God's love is so revealing. When the love of God becomes the source, it throws out all the other motives and sources, and this is always so disruptive and surprising that we call it "conversion," or "transformation." Or in Jesus' words: "*You must be born anew.*"

Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message? I dated Mariana back in our college days. In the summer and on vacation breaks, I still wanted to see her. She lived in Altadena; I lived in Long Beach. There were no freeways yet; it was two hours of stop-and-go traffic between Long Beach and Altadena. Money for gas was no joke for me back then either. Once in Altadena, her parents would interfere as much as possible. They liked to take as much advantage of some free labor as they could. I noticed, but it was worth it; it was part of the game – so be it. But did I travel two hours so I could mow lawns and paint houses? That is, was it for the Law, or for the Love? Was it the driving or the working or the expense that gave my life a light and wonder that it had not had before? (This was a different age, you might remember. We weren't "doing it." I wanted to marry her, but that seemed a long way off in a distant future; certainly it would have to wait at least until after I graduated from college. That seemed like forever at the time, kind of like waiting for Heaven in some far-off future realm. But instant gratification was not the only creed in those days.)

You know what? A lot of us get married for love and still go right back to the Law (at least for a while). We go back to behavior and whether we are pleased by everything our mate is *doing*. Paul is so annoyed! "*You stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you?*" Having started out with love, are you going back to the Law – trading love on the inside for what pleases you on the outside? Oh, it isn't just an ancient letter – it is everywhere we turn in life.

And it's tougher than we are told or taught because the world around us has no inkling – no awareness at all – of the newness of the Gospel. When she says she loves you, do you believe it – I mean *really* believe it? Everything depends on believing it, or you cannot even begin

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to experience the incredible new possibilities. How easy it is to doubt it. In forty-five years of marriage counseling, I have never talked with a couple having problems where one or both of them had not concluded that their partner had stopped loving them. “If he truly loved me, he would do this, and he wouldn’t do that.” “If she really loved me, she wouldn’t do that, and she would do this.” Is that not back to the Law? Do we have to call it “The Ten Commandments” before you recognize it? Even if we know better on one level – even if we realize it’s not completely true – that is how we are feeling: That we are not loved. He does not love me, because he is not keeping my commandments. She does not love me, because she is not keeping my commandments. Right! And there are more than ten of them, too.

How easy it is to doubt her love, especially when it makes no sense to begin with. Why would she love me? Even I don’t, most of the time, so why would she? So when we are apart, which is a good part of any normal day, it’s hard to remember. Every kind of doubt and question comes into play, if we allow it. Just so with God.

Everything in a relationship depends on believing that you are cared about. If it is an important relationship, it depends upon believing that you are loved. That is the critical issue in a marriage, and it is most certainly the critical issue between us and God. Do I really trust that you love me? “Trust” is the real meaning of “faith.” That is why we started calling it the “Christian Faith.” It used to mean that *we trusted God* – by the revelation in Christ Jesus – *to love us*.

Abraham believed – he trusted God’s personal promise to him – and it was counted to him as righteousness. That is, it established the relationship between Abraham and God. This was not a relationship for later, after he got perfect. It was enacted and established to form the relationship from its beginning. Nobody else we know of had ever trusted God on such a level before Abraham. They thought God (the gods) only wanted service – that is, sacrifice. Humans only existed to bring food to the gods. But Abraham had stumbled into the presence of a God who wanted to make covenant – promises – and who wanted to bring benefit to Abraham and, through Abraham, to all people. Unheard of! Impossible! Who could possibly imagine such a thing back then? But Abraham ended up believing it. It took him from Ur to Haran to Canaan, and it took him into a whole new possibility for the meaning and purpose of life. And nothing was ever the same again. If you have a personal relationship with God, God began it with love for you too.

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Some of you are appalled when you study Genesis. What a questionable, imperfect character Abraham displays. You were expecting some great spiritual giant, full of wisdom and flawless character and impeccable behavior. After all, Abraham is called the “Father of Faith.” How interesting! Scratch the surface and we still don’t get it, do we? We want Abraham to be perfect – right back to the Law. But God deals with Abraham because of who God is, and because Abraham is willing to play. It has nothing to do with Abraham being perfect. Perhaps if God had perfect people to choose from, he might choose them. Meanwhile, God has to make do with folk like me and you.

Being a stupid Galatian does not mean your IQ is low. It means you have gone back to the world’s way of thinking, and back to trusting your own behavior instead of trusting God’s love. You expect too much of yourself, and too little of God. *Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?* Did you receive the Spirit because you went to college or earned a Ph.D.? Did you receive the Spirit because you got a promotion, bought a new car, or married the prettiest girl in town? Did you ever get closer to God because of your moral straightness, or because you thought you were doing things better than your neighbor? Have you ever, in any way, on any basis, received the Spirit because you deserved it, earned it, figured it out, or claimed it as your right?

Oh, it’s obvious, isn’t it, once Paul’s question reminds us. We get closer to God by trusting God’s love – by believing the Gospel. And of course, Paul knows that the Gospel would never even have occurred to us if Jesus had not come here – if He had not lived and died and risen to reveal it.

Happily, you might concede that *because* you receive the Spirit, you might also discover a truer identity, and in that process come to a clearer understanding of your vocatio. It is possible that then you might go to college, or go back to college with a different purpose in mind. It is not unlikely that in responding to the guidance of the Spirit, you might become more and more effective in accomplishing what you are here to accomplish – which might get you killed, or it might instead get you promoted; it might get you raises; it might get you into positions of more and more responsibility; you might find yourself with more resources with which to serve your Lord and His Kingdom, even here on earth. But that is still a true inversion of the process our world usually claims and

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teaches. And of course, at any juncture along the way, the Lord might require you to risk it all – or even lose it all – if that would serve a higher purpose.

Why would we care about that? Are we after the world's rewards, or the rewards of the Kingdom? *Answer me one question: Did you receive the Spirit by keeping the law or by believing the gospel message?* The problem with the church is that in many places, the people of the church do not truly live with Jesus, or for Jesus. Christianity is an afterthought, instead of the main show. But who are Jesus' greatest enemies? Satan is a problem. Evil people like Pilate and Herod are on the fringes, of course. People with earthly power, like Caesar and his officials, can become important from time to time in the drama of Jesus' church. But who are the *real* enemies? The Pharisees: the most "religious" people in the story – the people focused on being good and doing good deeds to prove their own righteousness. They do not mean to be enemies of God, but they cannot receive a relationship of love between themselves and God because they are too busy trying to earn and deserve it. They end up hating Jesus. He makes all their hard work seem foolish and unnecessary. They have so much time and effort invested, and He makes it clear that it will never bring them to the acceptance or peace they long for.

So they do not care for Jesus. They do not really care about you either, though they might sometimes do nice things for you if it matches their idea of being good. But they do not care if you find your soul, your vocatio, or your own relationship with God in Christ Jesus. They only want to build up the organization or the program, or get famous for all the good they are doing. But never do they care about *you* – your spiritual destiny or your true identity – even as they do not care about their own spiritual destiny or their own true identity or vocatio. It is sad. They are doing the best they can, from the best that they know. That is the anatomy of Pharisaism. Gospel simply has not yet registered on their souls. A few hypocrites are inevitable, but most Pharisees are incredibly sincere. After all, they wouldn't kill Jesus if they didn't care so much for the Law.