

GALATIANS TWO

The most important moment in a Catholic, Lutheran, or Episcopal worship service is the receiving of the Eucharist – the communion meal. The most important moment in a Protestant (that has stayed Protestant) worship service is the Scripture Reading. These two are not as divergent as some suppose. The Word made flesh for us and the Word proclaimed for us, both now reaching us in symbol form and carried to us via human agents. Except for human foolishness, they enhance each other and belong together. Yet in traditional Catholicism, it does not matter if Scripture is read or expounded, as long as the Eucharist is celebrated. In traditional Protestantism, it is not necessary to have communion, as long as the Word is read and proclaimed.

Many Protestant churches have been moving toward more emphasis on the communion meal. In my lifetime, Congregationalism has gone from central pulpit to divided chancel. An altar in the sanctuary would have seemed like blasphemy to the first two congregations that I served. Meanwhile, at least in America, some Catholic churches have begun to put more emphasis on Bible study, and even encourage their members to read the Bible. Forty years ago, Catholic laypeople were discouraged from reading the Bible, and even forbidden to read it. Priests, of course, could read and comment about it, but the Bible carried little weight in comparison to church tradition and creed. It was not put this way, but the Bible was one of the books banned by the Catholic church, at least for normal members. It was too dangerous for the common people.

We might remember that people who read the Bible, like Martin Luther and John Huss, had caused a lot of grief in Catholicism. So also, individual prayer – and trying to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit (which I teach you is the heart and core of the Christian WAY) – was considered heresy. During the Inquisition, you could be burned for such practices. Obeying the church was necessary and right. Forming your own opinions or having a personal/individual relationship with the Holy Spirit of Jesus was considered a satanic act of individual pride, both dangerous to your own soul and destructive to the church. How could there be any church unity if we each had our own prayer life?

That is a very good point. On the other hand, there would be no Christianity today if Jesus, Paul, Peter, or any of the early Christians had not been disobedient to the religious structures of their time, and obedient to their personal prayers.

GALATIANS TWO

For many generations of Christians, the only opportunity to hear, read, study, ponder, or discuss the meaning of the Bible was when they gathered for worship. Before the invention of the printing press (A.D. 1450), a hand-copied Bible was precious and expensive. A congregation had to pool resources to purchase one Bible for the whole community, and they were careful about who could use it. If somebody got it dirty or it ripped or became smudged, replacing it was as tough a challenge as getting a new organ or putting a new roof on the church.

The custom of reading the Bible in every worship service to this day comes from a time when none of the congregation had a Bible of their own and many of them could not read. It was very exciting to gather for worship and have another chance to hear the reading of the Sacred Word. All week long, you would be thinking about what you had heard read at the last service. No television, no newspapers, no movies, no sports events to distract you. And all week long, you would look forward to hearing what would be read at the coming worship service. Of course, you would try to remember as much of the reading as you possibly could, because the Scripture Reading would be the topic of much discussion throughout the week whenever you ran into other members of the church.

It would have been unbelievable to anyone from the time of Luther back to the time of Jesus (and even before) that you might actually possess a copy of the Bible all your own. It would have been even more unbelievable that, if you had your own Bible and were able to read, you would not search and ponder the Holy Word every day of your life. To have such wisdom and riches at your fingertips and then not bother to pay attention to it would have seemed a possibility beyond comprehension.

So times change, but not for all of us. For some of us, the Bible still ranks as one of the most precious possessions on the face of the earth. We not only read it at home, we still gather each week to hear it read and to ponder its meaning together. And if the sermon is bad or degenerates into some personal opinions about current events (as often happens in our time), at least we can listen to the Scripture Reading and seek the Word of the Lord that so often lurks in the words of the Bible. My homiletics professor in seminary sometimes commented: “Be comforted, gentlemen. Even if your sermon is wretched, at least they will have heard the Scripture Reading.”

I happen to know that most of you have a Bible of your own. Quite a few of you read it regularly. I often preach with this in mind, assuming that if the sermon intrigues you at all, you will go back to the passage

and think about it beyond the comments I have time for in one brief sermon. Well, brief to me. Certainly brief in comparison to the wealth contained in most of the passages we read here on Sunday mornings.

Most every Scripture Reading has us cutting in somewhere, leaving out the full context. Paul is passionate in this letter to the Galatians. He had started four churches in the area: Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe. He preached and taught as clearly as he could. And he paid a heavy price: Violent abuse in Pisidian Antioch. (Acts 13:45) A campaign of persecution against Paul and Barnabas, then expelled from the district. (Acts 13:50) A plan to maltreat and stone them at Iconium, though they got wind of it in time and escaped to Lystra. (Acts 14:5-6) At Lystra, Paul healed a cripple who had been lame from birth; the man had never walked in his life. So they stoned Paul, dragged him out of the city, and left him for dead. (Acts 14:8-19) I left out a few things, but not much. “There is no good deed in this world, no matter how small, that will ever go unpunished.”

I am relatively comfortable here this morning. A few people give me a hard time, now and again. I get bad-mouthed, lied about, and vilified, and some try to undo me or my ministry. But not very much lately. (Perhaps I should be worried.) Even so, I have never been stoned, beaten, or left for dead. I think I care about you a lot and care greatly about this church – want it to be faithful and a true witness to Jesus and His WAY, both as a congregation and in your personal lives. But I grow quiet inside when I read about what Paul invested in the Galatians. He risked his life at least three times to come back and visit them – to encourage and strengthen them. If you stoned me and left me for dead, would I ever come back here and take a chance on a repeat performance?

When I read Paul’s letter to the Galatian Christians, I am not bored. I am fascinated. What is he wanting to so urgently tell them? This is not a three-minute email. Paul is not sitting in a lovely, comfortable study with a nice computer. He is on the move, and writing material is expensive. He probably had to work most of a week to purchase the ink and the papyrus or parchment to write on. And he could not just stamp it and drop it in the mailbox; he had to find somebody willing to hand-carry it all the way to central Turkey, probably from Corinth. Would he pay or at least share expenses for this journey? And how he must have prayed, realizing he could not make the journey himself but could only send a letter. What could one letter do in the maelstrom that had developed there, with people making accusations and everybody in turmoil?

Somebody had brought Paul the news that the churches in Galatia were shifting allegiance from Paul's message and leadership to that of some Jewish/Christian missionaries from Jerusalem. They claimed stronger credentials, being from the Jerusalem church. They said that Paul was no real apostle, that he never walked with Jesus, that he didn't know what he was talking about – that in fact, he was leading them astray and would probably get them thrown into Hell. They told the new Christians in Galatia that it was obvious, to anybody who knew anything, that they must adhere to the Law of Moses, get circumcised, eat kosher food, be Jewish. It was fine to admire and believe in Jesus, but there was no excuse for breaking from Judaism; after all, Jesus never did. By the way, if these opponents of Paul were right, *you* are also going to Hell and there never should have been a Christian church open to unconverted Gentiles.

As it happens, this letter to the Galatians is the first extant primary source of information we have concerning Christian history. It is the first statement we know of concerning Gentile Christian theology. It is the only place we hear *from Paul himself* a timeline of his own personal life and story. We hear about Paul from his friend Luke (in Acts), but that is much later, and Luke was not even in the picture when Paul was forming the Galatian churches. We all get to choose what we read, but do you think what you are reading is more fascinating, more relevant, more important than this letter to the Galatians?

Paul is the agent, but this letter stands as the primary pillar – the clearest evidence we have – of what stopped the huge wave of influence that tried to drown and destroy the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What we seldom mention on Easter Sunday is that the Resurrection woke Satan up again. He was pretty happy on Good Friday and thought maybe now he could get a little rest. But Sunday was a disaster. So Satan went back to work with a vengeance. Now Satan's plan was to let anybody believe in Jesus who wanted to, as long as they did not take seriously anything Jesus taught or revealed to them. In other words, it was fine to believe in Jesus, as long as it did not change our life any: as long as it did not change our allegiance, our opinions, who we cared about, or how we did things, including worship. So the early followers kept disappearing back into the old ways – back into the Law, into guilt and shame, into fear and perfectionism – even if they called it all “Christian.”

For a while, Paul was very nearly a lone voice, outranked in almost every way we can imagine. It is obvious to us that Paul carried the day, but it was far from obvious when he wrote this letter. In fact, Paul fought

all his life for the right to be heard and for the right to be considered an apostle – an authentic messenger of the Christian Faith. Nothing hung on this letter except the entire history and destiny of Christianity. And a good deal of Christianity forgets or neglects it regularly, even to this day. Whenever we do that, we begin to drift away from the Christian Faith itself.

What could Paul say to turn the Galatian Christians back toward the Gospel? Well, I will let you read the letter, as many of you have done repeatedly. And each time you do, I suspect it reinspires you, as it does me, to be more faithful to our FAITH – that is, more trusting in Jesus, and in the love and mercy of God that He revealed – no matter who tries to frighten or control you with other messages.

Nevertheless, in what we call the second chapter of Galatians, we come into the middle of Paul's claim that his Gospel – his Message – is not of human origin. It is in defending his revelation and his personal calling from Jesus – his conversion and commission by Jesus Christ on the Damascus Road – that we get this personal lining-out of the earlier events in Paul's life. According to Galatians: After his conversion on the Damascus Road, Paul went, like Jesus, into the wilderness: to Mount Sinai (like Moses and Elijah before him), to the holiest place he knew. And he went "immediately," without consulting a single person. Then he returned to Damascus. Three years later, he went to Jerusalem and spent fifteen days there, with Peter. He also met James (Jesus' brother, now head of the Jerusalem church) but none of the other apostles. Paul is defending his claim that Jesus was the source of his revelation, his awareness, and his Message. The Holy Spirit of Jesus had personally appointed him an apostle to the Gentiles. It was a fitting punishment for a man willing to imprison and even kill Christians for not being Jewish enough.

Paul continues on with his timeline: He went back to Syria and Cilisia (Tarsus, his home town). Paul says he was still unknown by sight to the congregations in Judea. The point, not that anybody could miss it, is that the Holy Spirit of the Risen Christ is real and powerful enough to reach beyond the band of friends who had known Jesus in the flesh. It had reached this enemy of His followers (Saul), and it would reach beyond Judaism. So Paul knows more clearly than anybody, even more clearly than Peter, Barnabas, or any of the other disciples, what the real Message is. And because it is not of human origin, he is unable to deny or forsake it, even if sometimes he might long to do so. "The good news is I love and forgive you. The bad news is I also love the *goyim*. And I

appoint you to go tell them.” DAMN! What a nasty thing to do to a man as Jewish as this young man named Saul.

Fourteen years later, Paul went to Jerusalem with Barnabas (taking Titus with them). Though it is no longer news to you, I was once shocked to discover that there was such a long gap between Paul’s conversion and the first missionary journey. When your life gets blown completely off its rails, it takes a while to get things sorted out, to rethink everything you ever believed, to get your values and purposes reorganized.

Of small concern to you perhaps, but of great interest to me is that this letter from Paul gives us interesting information about the dating and timing of events – information that scholars still argue about. Is this trip to Jerusalem before or after the first missionary journey? The Book of Acts mentions two journeys to Jerusalem that might correspond to the one Paul mentions; if the Jerusalem trip is after the first missionary journey (as nearly all liberal scholars agree), why doesn’t Paul mention the earlier one? Do the “fourteen years” date from the time of his conversion or from the time he went back to Tarsus (as the flow of the letter implies)? Maybe Paul really *does* know his own story, and the constant tendency of liberal scholars to push the dates later and later is unwarranted. Are we really sure that Titus and Paul did not meet in the excitement of that first year in Antioch when Gentiles were joining the church? Very probably we will never know, at least not in this lifetime.

I know; I’m bugging you with details nobody cares about. But one of the ways humans keep themselves bored is by knowing so little that they miss all the drama. The more people read the Bible, the more they get excited about it. I have been noticing for over fifty years that the people who are not very interested in Christianity are the people who know very little about it. I think baseball is really boring, but I don’t know the players, their batting averages, which teams they play on, or even what teams there *are* or how they are doing. Years ago I knew enough to understand baseball’s fascination: every game was a crucial drama; every pitch was a mini-story unfolding, and we were rooting either for the hitter or the pitcher. But when I became a man, I put away childish things. [boo hiss] Well, it’s true that I only traded some childish things for others. But in my defense, I have little reason to suspect that baseball has anything to do with my destiny, my purpose in life, my values, my choices, or my eternal soul. Therefore, in my view, baseball is optional. The Christian Faith is not. And yes, I do know that a lot of

people put it the other way around. And I am still glad that it's a free country. The point, if you lost it, is that we are bored most often by things when we know very little about them.

You heard some of Paul's other comments about his efforts to heal some of the disagreements between himself and the Jerusalem church. I am very glad Paul tried to do this; he did it on several occasions. My suspicion is that the agreements they reached were never as amicable as is sometimes implied. The hottest battle in the New Testament is Grace versus Law: **Do we have to get perfect before God loves us, or does knowing that God loves us inspire us to move toward a new and better Life?** It sounds simpler than it is – and it got Jesus crucified, and it got Paul beaten, stoned, mobbed, and eventually killed also. If you teach people that love and acceptance come before perfect behavior, most folks will assume that you are encouraging everybody to run amok. That is the deep conviction of nearly all the structures of mankind down to the present day, including most organizations bearing the name “Christian.”

All his life, Paul was accused of teaching anarchy and immorality because he preached the Gospel of God's incredible love revealed in Jesus Christ. Yet Paul insisted that once converted – truly forgiven and loved – people would love God back and want more than ever to please and obey the Holy Spirit, now present and known to them. But Paul was talking about *the experience* of being loved and forgiven – as *he* had encountered it on the Damascus Road. His opponents were talking mere theory – *ideas* about love and forgiveness – and they did not *think* it would work. Both are right: Mere ideas and theories do not work; they do not change people's hearts. And the real *experience* of being loved and forgiven *does* work, and we are never again the same. In any case, most of the world still insists that our only hope is to *make* people be good. Threats, courts, jails, police, lawyers, judges, wars, and all our disapproval and punishments will *make* people be good.

Running into Jesus, Paul had finally seen that this was utter stupidity. The human race and its religions had been trying it for thousands of years to no avail. You cannot make people be good. The truth is, most people *want* to be good and cannot make it. That is the real sorrow. The harder people try to earn and be worthy of God's approval and love, the more rigid, unloving, and judgmental they become. Trying to be good is the great theological mirage. The more you chase it, the more it recedes, and the more exhausted you become. Only in despair of never being good enough, smart enough, caring enough, or worthy or

accomplished enough to deserve to be loved do we stop long enough, get quiet enough, and get out of ourselves and our fear and shame for long enough to notice the God who already loves us. That rarely happens until somewhere in our awareness, there is a Cross.

No earthly organization can sustain this perspective, this Gospel Message. Institutions are afraid the Gospel will be the end of productive coercion – the end of control, sustained discipline, motivated behavior, and a profitable year-end report. How can we succeed, impress others, make a good showing, or help others if we do not force our plans, programs, quotas, and agendas on each other? Where can we go in this world where we are told: write your own covenant; do it out of your own prayers; do it to please *your* God, not anybody else's? Where can we go where the organization itself fights every effort to impose outer programs and signs of success on us? Where the organization itself truly wants every child and every adult to find their own identity; their own purpose and vocatio; their own faith; their own allegiance to the Holy Spirit of Jesus who speaks to the inner being – this Jesus who always gives us the choice of whether or not we will respond or listen or obey?

Was there any struggle, any battle, any consternation over moving toward becoming this kind of church? The fight was bigger and hotter than some of you know. I am so very grateful to those of you who saw the Gospel clearly enough and who were courageous enough to take a stand that allowed us to at least *want* to become this kind of church. And I will remain endlessly grateful to those of you who will stay vigilant enough to discern and oppose all efforts to turn us back into an organization that is trying to impress the world, succeed on this world's terms, or live for earthly purposes or programs or goals. Our only purpose is to obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit, individually and together.

It is a very different kind of LIFE. However beautiful, it is hard to claim and even harder to maintain. There are endless forces and temptations and pressures to move us to something more concrete, more practical, more impressive. But if we believe in the Holy Spirit of our Resurrected Lord, there is nothing more important or more practical – and certainly nothing more faithful. But in reality, it requires far more from each of us than any worldly approach or program ever could. We have to pray *constantly*. We have to love Jesus *ourselves*. We have to discern what the Spirit is asking of us *on a daily basis*. We also get the joy of His presence and love on a daily basis. No earthly opinion and no earthly approval are ever allowed to stand in for that.

GALATIANS TWO

We are not outwardly controlled. We are Spirit-driven. Our lives are a free-will offering to Jesus, our Savior. This is never perfectly true, but this is the New Life we turn to – the New Life we love and believe in and move toward. We want it not only for ourselves but for all those we love – even our mates, our children, our friends. So with Paul we say:

“Through the law we died to the law, that we might live to God. We have been crucified with Christ. We have died to the ways of this world. It is no longer our old selves who live, but Christ who lives in us. The life we now live in the flesh, we live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself up for us.”

Hallelujah! He really is risen!