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# Opportunity to Do Good: The Letter to the Galatians

Craig R. Koester

Luther Seminary, ckoester@luthersem.edu

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## Opportunity to Do Good: The Letter to the Galatians\*

CRAIG KOESTER

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

Luther once commented, “The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle, to which I am betrothed. It is my Katie von Bora.”<sup>1</sup> Other interpreters have been less enchanted with the letter. Its rhetoric is impassioned and sometimes extreme. Paul’s curse on those who proclaim a different gospel (1:9-10) and his suggestion that those who preach circumcision should mutilate themselves (5:12) scarcely appear to model pastoral sensitivity. His logic seems difficult to follow and his exegesis strained (3:16-17; 4:21-31). But perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the letter is its message of freedom. Many would agree that the message was a good one for Paul’s time and for the Reformers who had labored under the medieval penitential system. But in our time hasn’t freedom run wild? For us, isn’t freedom precisely *the problem*?

The lectionary (Series C) offers us six weeks (Pentecost 2-7) to look more closely at this important epistle. When we do so, we recognize that its context was not so different from our own. The Galatians were former pagans, who had been converted by Paul. Later, some other Christian evangelists appeared in Galatia preaching a gospel that included observance of the Mosaic law. The new gospel was seductive and apparently did not strike

\*This essay was written after extended conversation with professors Nan Aalborg and Arland Hultgren of Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary and Pastor Leslie Svendsen of St. John’s Lutheran Church, Northfield, Minnesota.

<sup>1</sup>*Lectures on Galatians 1535, Chapters 1-4*, vol. 26 of *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963) ix.

the Galatians as a form of neurotic legalism. The new preachers were apparently saying something like this:

You Galatians have taken an important first step by coming to faith in Christ. Now complete what you have begun by observing the Mosaic law (3:3). Become circumcised (5:2), celebrate the Jewish festivals (4:10), and observe the kosher food laws (cf. 2:12). Only by assuming these responsibilities will you share fully in the inheritance promised to God’s people. Think of Abraham, who “believed in God,” and became circumcised. Like Abraham, you too believe. Now do what Abraham did: accept circumcision and your covenant obligations.

This message may have been attractive to the Galatians because they considered Paul’s gospel of freedom inadequate. The law would give them clear marks of identity, such as circumcision and distinctive rituals. Moreover, it would offer clear directives on how to deal with

“the flesh with its passions and desires” (5:24), and what to do when someone “is overtaken in any trespass” (6:1). Paul accepts the challenges presented by these issues, as the modern preacher must do. His letter will argue for *freedom*—and for *responsibility* that expresses rather than abrogates the freedom of the gospel.

### *Pentecost 2: Galatians 1:1-10*

The first section of the letter takes the Galatians back to their origins, to the gospel that Paul had preached to them (1:8-9). The text is well-suited to the beginning of the Pentecost season when we too recall our beginnings and reflect on our own mission. References to “the gospel” (1:6, 7, 11; 2:2, 5, 7, 14) and to “preaching” (1:8, 9, 11, 16, 23) pepper the opening chapters of the letter. Paul expands the usual salutation, “Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3), by reminding them that Christ “gave himself for our sins” (1:4a). The words recall Paul’s earlier preaching at Galatia, when “Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” (3:1). Through the death of Jesus, God had delivered them “from the present evil age” (1:4b), which was not merely a period of time, but a sphere of power in which evil, sin, and death hold sway. The death of Jesus marks the turn of the ages (4:4-5), when God liberates people from the power of sin for life as his children.

Paul warned that those who turned away from the gospel of Christ crucified to a message that included observance of the Mosaic law were deserting the God who had called them in grace. He added that those who preached such a gospel stood under a curse (1:6-9). We may wonder why Paul was so upset. After all, the Galatians were considering circumcision, not gross immorality, sedition, or other “conduct unbecoming” a Christian. We might suggest that Paul show a healthier tolerance for diversity.

Yet Paul could not tolerate anything that would obscure the centrality of Christ crucified. He insists on a clear distinction between what God has done and what people do. When the two are confused, people begin to play God. Douglas John Hall observed, “Perhaps the most ironic fact of the history of Western civilization is that the ‘other’ gospel against which Paul spoke in the name of the crucified Christ became, in a very short time, the

dominant religion of the West.”<sup>2</sup> The cross became the symbol for our human quests for power, rather than the mark of the power of God. With a subtle twist, the authority of the gospel is identified with the authority of a given faction within the church, and the gospel of Christ becomes equated with a liberal or conservative party platform.

Paul’s stress on the distinction between what God has done and what people do is vital to the freedom of pastor and congregation alike.<sup>3</sup> First, it fosters freedom in the congregation because it is the authority to which all—pastor and people—are accountable. Paul notes especially that those who preach stand under, not above the gospel (1:8-9). Second, the gospel fosters freedom for pastors, because the integrity of one’s ministry stems from fidelity to the gospel, not from one’s own skill in currying favor with the public (1:10). Preaching should of course be interesting, but ultimately the effectiveness of the message rests in God’s hands.

### *Pentecost 3: Galatians 1:11-21*

The Galatians were beginning to think that Paul had given them a Christianity-made-easy,

that they had heard only half the story: Jesus, but not Torah. Paul's opponents easily could have pointed out that apostles like Peter, James, and John proclaimed Jesus as messiah while continuing to observe Jewish practices. The natural inference was that Paul was ignoring the law in order to win converts quickly.

Paul defended his gospel and mission by insisting that they were divinely authorized, yet independent of Jerusalem. "I did not receive [the gospel] from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (1:11b-12). Paul was not suggesting that truth came solely by direct revelation; he fully expected people to receive the gospel through teaching and preaching (cf. 1:9). Instead, he was trying to show that he had not derived his proclamation from the Jerusalem apostles and then simply ignored observance of the law to make it more palatable to Gentiles. His gospel had its own independent vitality.

His life story underscores the point. First, he would be the last person on earth to fabricate a Christianity-made-easy by ignoring the law. Formerly, Paul had been known precisely for his devotion to the law, which had generated hostility to the crucified messiah whom the law had placed under a curse (Gal 3:13; Deut 21:23). Second, Paul's mission began and was conducted independently of Jerusalem. He had been active in Damascus, Arabia (i.e., Nabatea—modern-day Jordan), Syria, and Cilicia; but he had only paid one brief visit to Jerusalem three years after his call. He was not proclaiming an abridged version of something he had heard in Jerusalem.

Questions about the integrity of Paul's gospel have changed in character, but they have not gone away. Isn't Paul giving us a Christianity-made-easy? Doesn't his theology lead to passivity rather than concern for action? Paul's own autobiography issues a resounding "No" to these questions. Paul himself was anything but passive. The gospel he preached was not "an

<sup>2</sup>Douglas John Hall, *Lighten Our Darkness* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976) 115.

<sup>3</sup>See Charles B. Cousar, *Galatians* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 21-24. This Interpretation commentary is very useful for preaching.

opiate for the people," but an "adrenaline for mission." The gospel moved him beyond the bounds of his Jewish heritage into the world around him. Does the gospel do any less for those who are touched by it today?

#### *Pentecost 4: Galatians 2:11-21*

Justification by faith, the hallmark of the Reformation, is the focus of this theologically charged portion of Galatians. The Reformers discovered in these verses a message that addressed the problem of guilt or the terrified conscience. Paul himself, however, did not seem to be plagued by guilt in the same way Luther was. His autobiographical summaries recall his former confidence in regard to the Mosaic law (Gal 1:13-14; Phil 3:4-6). Instead, Paul turned to justification to address a social issue, the issue of fellowship and unity within the church.

The description of the incident at Antioch sets the stage. Peter, who led the mission to the Jews, had joined in table fellowship with Gentile Christians, but withdrew when some other Jewish Christians arrived. Paul challenged him by saying, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Gal 2:14). Peter could have replied that he was *not* compelling Gentile Christians to live like Jews. The Jerusalem Council had agreed that Gentile Christians did not need to observe the law, while assuming that

Jewish Christians would continue to observe it. By eating with Gentiles Peter had overstepped the bounds of the agreement; but later he recognized his mistake and simply withdrew from the table.

But Paul was enraged because Peter's action implied that Gentile Christians were second-class citizens, who would only become acceptable table companions when they began keeping kosher. The Jerusalem Council had concluded by affirming the unity and fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Jewish and Gentile missions on the basis of God's grace (2:9). By leaving the table at Antioch, Peter silently stated that fellowship was based on the Mosaic law, rather than God's grace.

Paul pointed out that all Christians—even those of Jewish origin like Peter and himself—acknowledged that people were put right with God only through faith in Christ (2:15-16; cf. Ps 143:2). Since people *become righteous* by faith in Christ and not by the Torah, they also *live* by faith in Christ and not by the Torah (2:19-20). Justification is the basis of our relationship with God and with one another.

Contemporary proclamation of this text might begin with justification as the basis for our life, mission, and unity as Christians. Justification means that all people enter into a relationship with God on the same basis; it also means that people belong to the church on the same basis. The church does not reach out only to those who are like-minded, and of similar social, educational, or economic backgrounds; the gospel is for everyone. Alternatively, one might begin with the current emphasis on “inclusiveness” in the church and ask why anyone would *want* to be included. Ultimately, people are drawn into the fellowship in the church because there they hear the gospel which draws them into fellowship with God.

### *Pentecost 5: Galatians 3:23-29*

The third chapter of Galatians deals with the identity question: Who are we? What are our roots? What are the marks of our identity? The law offered the security of circumcision and Jewish festivals, practices which would set the Galatians apart as a distinct people with an ancient and venerable heritage. But Paul responds that “if you are *Christ's* then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise” (3:29). The Scriptures announced that in Abraham “shall all the nations [Gentiles] be blessed” (Gen 12:3; 18:18; Gal 3:8). The Gentile nations were by definition not Jewish, yet God had promised that even these uncircumcised Gentiles would be blessed. At Galatia God made good on his promise; the Gentiles in Galatia were blessed when Christ crucified was proclaimed and they received the Holy Spirit.

But one wonders why God bothered giving the law at all (3:19). To answer the question Paul described the law as a “pedagogue” (“custodian,” RSV). A pedagogue was not a teacher, but a slave who led children to and away from school. Pedagogues were responsible for protecting the children, but were often pictured as harsh disciplinarians. Aesop, the teller of fables, was a good example. He was a slave “of loathsome aspect, worthless as a servant, potbellied, misshapen of head, snub-nosed, swarthy, dwarfish, bandy-legged, short-armed, squint-eyed, liver-lipped—a portentous monstrosity.” When a slave dealer asked how anyone could possibly want to buy him, Aesop asked if the dealer was ever troubled by rowdy fellows in the slave market. The dealer said that he was, and Aesop replied, “Buy me and make me their pedagogue. They'll be afraid of my ugly face and will stop acting so unruly.”<sup>4</sup> Paul picks up on such imagery.

He says that the law was a pedagogue that “confined” people and kept them under “restraint” until Christ came. But now that Christ had come, these children had been set free. The doors are open; the final bell of the school year has rung. Why would a child want to spend summer vacation sitting in study hall? Why would a Christian want to go back to confinement under the law?

The law had divided people into various categories: Jews and Greeks, slave and free, male and female. Jews observed the Mosaic law; Gentiles did not; some laws were for slaves and some for free people; circumcision was for men and other statutes applied to women. But now the old distinctions had given way before a greater unity in Christ. Paul does not even say that in Christ are *both* Jew and Greek; he says that there is *neither* Jew nor Greek. Baptism, unlike circumcision, transcends the distinctions between Jew and Gentile, male and female, and gives all people a new identity. Christians are people with a rich heritage, who through Christ share in the inheritance promised to Abraham.

The practical consequences of this baptismal formula are reflected at various points in Paul’s letters. The Jewish-Gentile issue is prominent in Galatians. In Philemon Paul urges a slave owner to accept his runaway back—not as slave or free, but as a beloved brother (Phlm 16). The complexity of Paul’s statements about men and women is well-known; but in

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<sup>4</sup>Adapted from Lloyd W. Daly, *Aesop without Morals* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1961) 31, 37.

matters of marriage and divorce he speaks of men and women in the same terms (1 Cor 7:10-16), and assumes that in public worship both men and women can speak a word to God in prayer and speak a word from God in prophecy (1 Cor 11:4-5—this text is at odds with 1 Cor 14:34-35).

#### *Pentecost 6: Galatians 5:1, 13-26*

Some have charged that the freedom Paul preached is too easy. But perhaps the reverse is true, that freedom is too hard. In his haunting story of the “Grand Inquisitor,” Dostoevsky spoke of our desire to flee from freedom. In this tale, Christ returns to earth and is arrested by the aged head of the Inquisition. Through his pale, bloodless lips the Inquisitor charges that Christ had come

with empty hands, with some promise of freedom which people in their simplicity and natural unruliness cannot even understand, which they fear and dread...So long as people remain free they strive for nothing so incessantly and painfully as someone to worship. But they seek to worship what is established beyond dispute....This craving for community of worship is the chief misery of every human being individually and of all humanity from the beginning of time. For the sake of common worship they’ve slain each other with the sword.<sup>5</sup>

Paul knew well the dangers of freedom. Even Christians “bite and devour one another” (5:15), fall prey to conceit and envy, and provoke one another (5:26). Does freedom inevitably destroy community?

According to Paul, true freedom is precisely the foundation for community, because it means freedom from sin as well as from law. Community is destroyed not by freedom, but by

bondage to the desires of the flesh (5:19-21). True freedom is produced by the Holy Spirit; it is expressed in love for the neighbor and in the joy, peace, patience, etc., which build up the community. Such love is impossible precisely for those held captive by the flesh.

Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit can be viewed as the description of a doormat personality, one who is willing to tolerate almost anything without a word. The angry tone of the letter, however, provides a striking correction to this approach. On the surface, Paul's anger and passionate language could be taken as a sign that Paul himself had fallen prey to the flesh (cf. 5:20!). Yet in a more profound way, Paul's anger was indeed an expression of love, which was intended precisely to build up the Galatians. The expression "tough love" captures an important dimension of Paul's message at this point.

#### *Pentecost 7: Galatians 6:1-10, 14-16*

Paul concluded the letter by taking the pen from his scribe and scrawling, "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but a new creation" (6:14-15). Three deaths have occurred: Christ died, the world died,

<sup>5</sup>Adapted from Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Modern Library, 1950) 299-301.

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page 189

Paul died. The cross brought about a change of cosmic scope. The law had divided the world into the circumcised and uncircumcised; life was lived by these reference points. But the cross signaled the coming of "a new creation," in which the old boundaries had been obliterated by the cross.

To envision what Paul is talking about, think of a person growing up in a traditional village in central India. The person's world is divided into Hindu, Moslem, Sikh, and Christian; into high caste and low caste. These distinctions shape the course of one's life, whom one marries, with whom one associates. But suddenly take the person to a traditional village in central Iowa. The person is in a different world! The familiar distinctions are gone; the person must adapt to the new setting. Paul was telling the Galatians that they too lived in a new world, in which the marks of the old world had vanished.

The reference point for the new age is the cross. On the cross Christ "gave himself for our sins" (1:4); there the Son of God loved us and gave himself for us (2:20). The self-giving love of Christ provides a motivation and a pattern for the lives of those who follow him. As Christ bore a curse for us (3:13), Christians "bear one another's burdens" (6:2). Such conduct "fulfill[s] the law of Christ"—a stunning expression which counters charges that Christian freedom means "lawlessness" or self-will.

Throughout the first part of the epistle, Paul stressed what God had already done. In chapter 6 he switches to the future tense, reminding the Galatians of what is yet to come. Christians had been delivered from the present evil age, but the powers of evil remain active. Paul's stress on human accountability (6:7-10) is a way of cautioning people against the delusion that they have become immune from sin. It is precisely through God-given freedom that Christians have the "opportunity...[to] do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith" (6:10).