

The house churches of Galatia are in crisis. Jewish Christians among them are having success getting people to try and keep the Jewish law. They believe it is critically important to have men circumcised and women and men together obey the practices of Orthodox Judaism. First Century Galatia is a place dominated by non-Jews. Most have come to be part of the church by developing an understanding and finding their own faith in Jesus of Nazareth. Members of house churches have become members of these fellowships because of Jesus Christ. Now these “enlightened” converts are telling house church members they must do more to be completely Christian.

Churches in our day are in crisis. Younger couples and older members are tired of church wars. They are weary of church fights, of conflict among members and members snubbing somebody over something. People within and without the church all want caring fellowships. People are hungry for congregations where people are genuinely growing, not fussing. Twenty first century North America like the rest of the world is affected by a serious economic downturn. Add to this, earthquakes in three different parts of the world and an oil spill that may change the way we think about transportation before it is over. Then...there are personal crises affecting us in different ways. And there is a culture pulling everyone away from worship on Sunday morning not to mention other aspects of the mission of our church.

This morning, we turn to what some call the high point of this letter to the churches of Galatia. Paul uses every kind of rationale to help his friends in Galatia consider what is important. He sees members misunderstanding their own faith. He explains the law is like an assistant principal before faith came. It shows people where they misbehave. It has its place. Now that faith in Jesus Christ has come, there is no longer the same need for this assistant principal. He claims they do not have to do anything more to be Christian than to trust Jesus Christ. He reminds them of their baptism. All of them have been baptized. Paul reminds them after being baptized, they begin a new way of living. They put it on like they put on their winter coats. They put on Jesus Christ like they put on their clothing. He says this changes everything. Behind and beneath their faith in Christ has been a vital truth they should know. Because of Jesus Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. They are all one because of him. Because of Jesus Christ, the old categories just do not work the same way anymore.

Let’s consider briefly what this means for us. Many work hard to arrive at a place where they can be who they are. Many work hard to understand who they are they forget those around them. Sometimes we all forget those around us are working hard to live their life by faith.

Look at this black man. In the last forty years, he has come a long way. Do we still see him as a black man or do we see him as a man? I have heard people say, “If you still call someone an African American or black or something, you put him or her in another category.” Look at the immigrant. Since the Immigration bill in the 1960s, he and his family have come a long way. Do we still see him as an immigrant or do we call him by his name? Look at this woman who lives with a friend. She has a partner she has had for years. Is she a lesbian? If she is, she has come a ways in the last few years. Do we see her as a human being or as a category? Go ahead and pick any category, any division. What matters, Paul says, we are...because of Jesus Christ...because of faith in Jesus Christ...we are family...we are one.

How do any of us know who is who? We know. We have ways. Look at the conservative evangelical. He works so hard to understand himself and his faith and relationship with God in clear ways. He works to share the gospel in ways that are faithful and true to the scriptures. Look at this feminist theologian leader. She works so hard to speak out of her progressive ideas of peace and justice. Often on cue, she says things we expect her to say. Paul reminds her and us to be careful about how we look at these brothers and sisters. There is no longer African American or white; there is no longer immigrant or citizen; there is no longer homosexual or straight, for all of us are one in Christ Jesus. Here is a way of thinking that offends everyone and includes everyone. Why is it we see someone and immediately have a category for them? Aren’t we more than categories? Paul says our differences really do not matter in the greater scheme of things. What matters is that in Christ, we are one.

As someone has said, “Christ alone matters: Christ our unity, Christ our focus, Christ the line of energy along which relationships run, Christ the beginning and the end, Christ the cause for which we live, Christ from which nothing can take us, not even death—especially not death.” (165, Holtz-Martin)

The truth is there really are no divisions anymore because of Jesus Christ. If we can believe this or if we can simply try to believe this, this church and this world will be a better place. It will be a better place because we begin to experience that the prejudices we have and the fences we build are not there in Christ. Jesus Christ has torn down all the fences with his love. Perhaps the next time someone snubs you, the next time someone ignores you, the next time someone walks by you and I, we should remind ourselves. “I guess she has not gotten the memo yet; we are all family in Christ.”

Forty years ago, I read Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s little book, Life Together. He wrote the book to help his German Christian friends to understand the meaning of the church, the meaning of fellowship in the church. He says that the goal of all Christian community is for members to “meet one another as bringers of the message of salvation.” (23, Bonhoeffer) You have a word that I need to hear. I need to listen to you and hear God’s word through you. I am coming to understand I have not listened hard enough.

You say you don’t have a word? You don’t have anything for anyone else? Perhaps you need to listen to this testimony about Jesus. It is the new testimony. It explains why Jesus is the hope of our world. It explains why Jesus is your hope and my hope. This new testimony is the New Testament. It is your story; it is our story. If you are wondering about a way to find your faith in Christ, a way to reinvent your faith in Christ, it is there for us to read and study. So pick up a New Testament and begin reading about this man who is changing our lives.

This is not at all what I was planning to say. I suppose I have lived with Galatians 3:28 a while, it has had an effect. I had planned to spend more time with Paul’s use of the phrase “in Christ.” I would have looked at his use of this powerful idea and offered an interpretation. Then I realized this is what I have been doing for 12 years. I have been giving you my interpretations. There are some who hear what I say and learn from it. There are some who hear what I say and leave in disagreement. Paul is saying whether you agree or disagree with me, it does not matter. If we are “in Christ,” we are one. If we belong to Christ, if we follow Christ, if we relate to him in the way we know best, we are one. Not because we are so special. We are one because of the Spirit and the truth of God.

Remember the Gerasene demoniac story? Did you notice Jesus and his friends went on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the non-Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee? Jesus does something amazing for this non-Jew. The Jews who heard this story would have been amused that Jesus sends the demons into the herd of pigs and they rush down the side of the hill into the water at their own peril. Now this man belongs to Jesus. His is not the only story. Whatever story we have that brings us to faith is sacred. We represent many sacred stories. Paul is saying we are divided no longer. Because of Jesus Christ we are one. This may not change our life together completely. If we can believe these words or if we can try to believe these words, we will be working alongside the Spirit of Jesus Christ who is changing us and changing the world in which we live.

Works Cited

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