

9 Galatians. “Christ liberated us (from the Law) that we might remain free” (5:1)

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1. Judaism, Anti-Judaism and Paul the Jew. While 1 John reveals that “God is love” and James teaches us to practice liberating justice in the face of oppression, Paul in Galatians proclaims an even more

fundamental truth -- liberty: "For freedom Christ has set us free (from the law)" (5:1). Love presupposes freedom (divine and human), and the goal of biblical justice is the liberation of the oppressed. Therefore, according to the Exodus paradigm, liberation and freedom constitute a truth even more fundamental than love and justice.

However, considering liberation and freedom more basic than justice and love does not mean that they are more important or more valuable. Freedom can only create a framework or foundation for many possibilities, but it is easily abused: "As slaves of God, live as free people, yet do not use your liberation as a pretext for oppression" (1 Peter 2:16). In Galatians Paul puts it this way: "You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, but do not use your freedom as an opportunity for selfish indulgence; rather through love become slaves to one another" (5:13-14).

The Bible does not distinguish between "moral" law and "cultic" law, but it does distinguish those dimensions and uses of the law that manifest love and promote liberating justice (Romans 8:4; 2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Timothy 1:9). Cultic and national dimensions, such as circumcision, are not applicable to the Gentiles as are love and discipline, the fruit of the Spirit.

Despite the clarity of Galatians' liberating message, Bible scholars differ somewhat in specifying the letter's precise geographical and historical context.

-- The majority identify the meeting that Paul mentions in Gal. 2:1-10 with the later council of Acts 15; they understand that the "Galatians" were the ethnic people of that name in the north near the modern city of Ankara in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), whom Paul also visited (Acts 16:6 and 18:23); thus they date the letter around 55 AD, shortly before Romans.

-- Others, however, point out that the Roman province of Galatia extended to the south and included the cities of Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe (where Paul established churches according to Acts 14:1-23); they identify the meeting of Galatians 2:1-10 with the early visit to Jerusalem to alleviate famine (Acts 11:27-30; 12:25), and thus suggest a date for the letter around 48-49 AD, making it the earliest of Paul's letters.

To think that in Galatians Paul speaks as a "Christian" attacking "Jewish" enemies would be mistaken, since the juxtaposition of these categories in that period of time is anachronistic. Paul never thought or spoke of himself as being "converted" from Judaism to Christianity. Rather he considered himself a Hebrew of the Hebrews (Phil. 3:5) called, not converted, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus to the

Gentiles (Gal. 1:15; Acts also always speaks of Paul's calling, not his "conversion" -- chapters 9, 22 and 26). The division between "synagogue" and "church" occurred after his ministry; cf. John Wesley, who died an Anglican clergyman, whose successors then established the Methodist denomination as a distinct and separate institution.

Paul had founded the churches in Galatia (1:2; 4:13-14), whether the ethnic region in the north or the entire Roman province including cities further south. However, behind the Apostle certain Judeo-Christian teachers had arrived who required pagan converts to be circumcised and also keep other prescriptions of Moses' law, such as the Sabbath and the feasts (4:10) and perhaps the food laws (2:12; 4:17). For Paul this teaching was not a religious-theological matter of little importance, much less a discrepancy regarding personal or social "ethics." Rather it represented a rejection of the truth of the Gospel itself (1:6-9; 2:5, 14). Paul became so indignant in the face of the Galatians' swallowing the false teaching that he omitted the expressions of gratitude to God with which he began his other letters (Romans 1:8-11; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; 2 Cor. 1:3-7; Phil. 1:3-11; 1 Thess. 1:2-10; Philemon 1:4-7).

From the beginning Paul underscores his own subversive authority as an apostle (1:1-2, 11-24) and that of Jesus as a liberator (1:3-5). For Paul the word "apostle" itself was almost synonymous with "free" (1 Cor. 9:1), since he itinerated everywhere, using his authority to subvert the oppressive powers of patriarchal households and empire. The Apostle aimed for the inclusive communities he founded to embody such freedom, which was Moses' fundamental accomplishment as well as that of Jesus in his death and resurrection. Originally it was thus even with the Galatians, until "false brothers slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ" (2:4) -- somewhat difficult to imagine in the case of many modern churches where middle-class conformity is the law and the words "liberation" and "freedom" are feared and censured.¹

Especially in Romans and Galatians, Paul insists that Christian freedom is part of the experience of justification by faith (Gal. 2:15-16; Romans 3:21-26). That is to say that God, like the father of the prodigal son, embraces and receives us (or like a judge, reclaims us and declares us just) on the basis of our faith and not because of our merits or works. Such teaching was of special importance for those who were marginalized, excluded, weak, poor and oppressed and frequently slandered in human courts.² The false teachers undoubtedly would have cited the case of Abraham, to whom God gave the commandment of circumcision (Genesis 17). But Paul responds that Abraham experienced divine justification by faith alone

before he was circumcised, and thus became the father also of Gentile believers, even though they were not circumcised (Gal. 3:1-18, 29; Genesis 15:6).

2. Homophobia, Sexism and Racism: “Another Gospel?” Of the ten people named in Galatians (two of whom are women), seven represent sexual minorities. Four are not married: Jesus Christ (1:1), Paul (1:1), Barnabas (2:1, 9, 13) and Titus, a Gentile (2:1, 3). The house of Abraham is not a typical “family”: Abraham, who sent away in divorce his concubine-slave Hagar (plus their son Ishmael, not mentioned here), and Sarah (3:6-18, 29; 4:21-31). Only Isaac (Abraham’s son by Sarah, married to Rebecca, 4:28), Peter (1:18; 2:8-9, 11-14) and James (1:19; 2:9-11) represent traditional marriages. No wonder Paul struggled so hard to make the Galatian churches inclusive of “unclean” and uncircumcised Gentiles!

Today Christian struggles in favor of the poor, women, blacks, sexual minorities and the physically challenged commonly are referred to as “justice issues,” which of course they are. However, Paul insists that the false teachers who demanded that Gentile believers be circumcised and keep the law of Moses were not preaching Jesus’ Good News to the poor, but “another gospel” (Gal. 1:6-9)! Similarly, with all our “justice issues” what we are really up against are false teachers who proclaim “another gospel”--however much they may pride themselves on being “evangelical.” What is at stake in such struggles is not some minor adjustment in the church’s “social ethics,” but the very Gospel itself.

In the struggle against homophobia, for instance, the issue may become clarified if we can learn to “think left-handedness.” Many churches still imagine that they proclaim Jesus’ Good News to everyone alike, whatever their sexual orientation. However, in fact, persons of homosexual orientation who respond soon find that a “circumcision party” is on their case: after simply “believing in Jesus” they learn that they are supposed to start thinking of themselves as heterosexual, submit to all kinds of “Ex-Gay” tortures to try to change their sexual orientation, get married, produce children, and avoid divorce at all cost. Not surprisingly, depressions, addictions, destructive behavior and suicides commonly result.

Today no one would dream of demanding that all left-handed persons “simply accept Christ as Savior and Lord”--but then devote decades in tortuous efforts to try to become right-handed, make “recognizing their true righthandedness” essential to their sanctification, and go through life acting (hypocritically!) like right-handed people! Anyone today who so pretended to “evangelize” left-handed people would be denounced as proclaiming “another gospel” totally at odds with Jesus’ liberating Good

News. For churches that have spent decades studying and arguing about “homosexuality”--rather than repenting of their homophobia--Galatians still has a prophetic word that needs heeding: those who seek to impose heterosexual norms on sexual minorities are preaching “another gospel.”

3. Remembering the Poor. The liberating Gospel that Paul sought to embody as an apostle and which he preached everywhere included a certain diversity between Peter’s ministry to the Jews and that of Paul to the Gentiles. However, as with Jesus’ Good News (“to the poor,” Luke 4:18), one fundamental issue was indispensable--not negotiable--and required unity: James, Peter and John “...asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do” (2:10 NRSV).³ Christian freedom, according to Paul, never permits us to neglect the needs of the poor, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love” (5:6 NRSV). In his eagerness to remember the poor and his acceptance of apostolic right hands of “fellowship” (koinonía, solidarity, 2:9), of course, Paul probably had in mind particularly the offering from Gentile churches he hoped to deliver to the poor Christian Jews in Jerusalem (--> 2 Cor. 8-9). The Galatians were expected to provide for their own poor: “let us do good to all people, especially to the household of faith” (Gal. 6:10 --> Titus; Eph. 4-28).

Although not specifically said to produce material poverty, oppression in Galatians has diverse and highly significant manifestations. Although not in prison (--> Philippians; Philemon), Paul does refer to the violent persecution he first perpetrated and later suffered (1:13, 23; 4:29; 5:11; 6:17) and which the false teachers sought to avoid (6:12). Above all, in Galatians Paul frequently views the law as an oppressive “yoke of slavery” from which Gentile believers should remain free (5:1; Acts 15:10), since all who are “under the law” (4:5, 21) also are under its “curse” (3:10,13). And if the law is an oppressor that brings a curse, circumcision of Gentile males represents a kind of violence, an emasculation/castration (5:12; 6:12) fervently to be avoided.

Paradoxically, the cross of Christ in Galatians both causes faithful disciples like Paul to suffer persecution, and yet also proves to be God’s decisive instrument of liberating justice, redeeming those under the oppressive yoke of the law (3:13). Believers come to experience God’s liberating justice (dikaosúne) not through the law, but only through Christ’s redeeming sacrifice (2:21; see 1:4; 4:5). In his eloquent rhetoric Paul can also suggest a more positive role for the law, compared to a disciplinarian who uses “tough love” to

get students to class on time (3:23-26). He can even refer to believers fulfilling “the law of Christ” by bearing one another’s burdens in love (6:2) and speaks of Moses’ entire law as summed up in the single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself” (5:14; Leviticus 19:18). However, for understanding Paul’s view of justice/justification fundamentally as expressions of God’s liberation from oppression, we must keep in view Galatians’ creative adaptation of the Exodus paradigm: its many negative references to the law as an oppressive yoke, with circumcision as a violent emasculation--and Jesus’ death and resurrection as God’s decisive acts for human liberation. .

4. Baptized Women: Free and Equal Paul names ten persons in Galatians, but only Abraham’s wife Sarah and her concubine-slave Hagar are women. In Jesus’ time it was just as revolutionary to address God as a personal “Father” as it is today to address God as “Mother”. In writing this letter, Paul of course used the Greek of the day, which like all traditional languages reflected a patriarchal ideology that took for granted male superiority (see “men, Father, brothers”, 1:1-4). Paul also teaches, however, that when women experience the Spirit in baptism, the new community transcends traditional dichotomies with their injustices and rigid roles (only males were circumcised):

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:26-28; see 4:4-7 --> 1 Cor. 12:13).

If we seek to modify the male chauvinism of the original Greek with inclusive translations (“sons and daughters” instead of “sons”), we run into difficulties. If we translate “sons” inclusively as “sons and daughters,” we have the problem that in ancient societies daughters had an inferior status and in general could not inherit properties.⁴ Paul, however, insists precisely that in Christ all of us, women and men, have the equally high status, privileges and freedom of “sons” in patriarchal societies. Christian communities are not to discriminate, treating free men differently from women and slaves--both inferior in status in his culture. Thus Paul can speak of God as “Father” (4:4-7), while referring to himself as a “mother” for the Galatian Christians (4:19).

Jointly with his use of Abraham as a paradigm of faith, Paul also offers an extensive allegory of Sarah, Abraham’s wife, and Hagar, Abraham’s slave and concubine who was sent away, that is, divorced

(4:21-31, sexual minorities). In accord with patriarchal and prescientific concepts, Galatians (4:26-27, 31, citing Isaiah 54:1) speaks of the heavenly Jerusalem as being literally sterile but spiritually very fruitful.

Finally, we note that Paul emphasizes that “by faith alone” we experience justification and receive the Spirit, but this faith does not remain alone forever. Instead of the patriarchal family with its multiple sons and daughters, and instead of the yoke of the law imposed by an outside authority, Paul focuses on the nine-fold “fruit of the Spirit” which is

“love, joy, peace,
patience, kindness, goodness,
faithfulness, gentleness and discipline,”

concluding with irony, “Against such things there is no law!” (5:22-23).

Scholars continue to be remarkably divided over the translation of a phrase in a text which for many is their favorite in Galatians and even of the entire Bible: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (2:20 NRSV; cf. the note “Or ‘by the faith of the Son of God.”) But even though translators disagree regarding the translation of one phrase, they all recognize that the Christian life, according to Paul, is lived because of the faith and faithfulness of Jesus, who inspires in us a personal faith.

5. The Sick and the Physically Challenged. Paul refers to his own literal physical challenge/illness (probably an eye malady) and the strong solidarity that the Galatians had manifested on that occasion. But later he would use metaphors of blindness in which the emotional pain of the Apostle would appear to be reflected in language of physical suffering:

3:1 “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes
that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!” (see 2:20; 3:13).

4:13-15 “You know that it was because of a physical infirmity (Greek, lit. “weakness”) that I first announced the gospel to you....Had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me....” Cf. 6:11 “See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!” (See also 2 Cor. 12:7; Acts 9:8-18; 22:9, 11-13; cf. 26:18.)

4:19 “My little children, for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.” Note the feminine side of Paul (--> 1 Thess. 2:7).

5:12 “I wish those who unsettle you [by preaching circumcision] would castrate themselves!”

6:17 “I carry the marks [Greek stigmata] of Jesus branded on my body.” (See HCSB note.)

Cf. 6:10 “let us do good” (also 6:2; Matthew 25:31-46 includes visiting the sick).

6. Paul and James. Especially since Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation, many have been concerned about the apparent contradiction between Paul’s teaching (in Galatians and Romans) and that of --> James. James writes:

“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone” (2:24 NRSV).

Meanwhile, Paul affirms:

“For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”

(Romans 3:28, NRSV);

“We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law” (Gal. 2:15-16).

At first glance these texts would appear to include three elements repeated in a total contradiction impossible to resolve. Consequently, Luther’s early reaction was to belittle James’ “ravings” as an epistle of “straw” and relegate it to the deuterocanonical books.

In modern times, however, it is Paul, not James, who runs the risk of being jettisoned (see this threat to him in Acts 27), especially by black, feminist, womanist, gay and liberation theologies. Reflecting on the long history of the use of Pauline texts to insult the dignity and deny the rights of slaves, African Americans, women, sexual minorities and the poor, one African-American pastor commented that Paul never encountered a status quo that he didn’t like. Even before the nineteenth century we can trace the history of the use of Pauline texts to disavow astronomy and scientific geography and to support the divine right of kings and monarchies against democracies and constitutional republics.

Defenders of a radical Paul, on the other hand, see the Apostle as a subversive who had learned to “choose his battles” (according to modern feminist wisdom). He was not interested in applying band-aids to preserve the status quo of the tyrannical Roman Empire but sought rather to subvert it completely. His strategy was to establish “counterculture” communities throughout the Roman Empire as the first fruits of the new just order that he hoped to see inaugurated even during his own lifetime with the return of Christ to reign on earth (-> Jude and 2 Peter, apocalyptic eschatology). In accordance with this more sympathetic reading of Paul, we can appreciate John Calvin’s wisdom when he insisted that James and Paul used the same words but with different meanings:

- When speaking of “faith” in 2:24, James refers to a purely intellectual belief, the type of faith that even the demons have, since they also “believe that there is only one God” (2:19). Paul also at times refers to an intellectual faith that believes in correct doctrines. But in Galatians and Romans the decisive faith that justifies and saves involves a complete confidence in Jesus that relies on his work for us, a commitment without reservation to Jesus as liberator and guide in the new life the Spirit gives us.

- When speaking of “works,” James refers to a believer’s works of love produced as the fruit of the Spirit and of faith. Paul also often refers to the Christian praxis that results from faith (“faith expressing itself through love,” Galatians 5:6; “the fruit of the Spirit,” 5:22-23). However, in Romans 3:28 and Galatians 2:15-16 the Apostle contrasts genuine faith with “works of the law” done before faith, which thus might proudly be claimed as a basis of merit, leading us to despise and reject God’s grace and Jesus’ sacrifice for us (Romans 3:27-31).

- When speaking of “justification” in 2:24, James speaks of the final judgment after death, where God takes into account our entire life -- our actions and deeds (--> Matt. 25:31-46). At times Paul also refers to this justification after death at the final judgment, where God takes into account a person’s entire life (Rom. 2:5-11). In Romans 3:28 and Galatians 2:15-16, however, Paul refers to a justification at the beginning of the Christian life, where God declares a person just by faith alone--an anticipation of the final judgment (see Jesus’ teaching that the humble publican “went down to his house justified,” Luke 18:14).

Notes

1. Jacques Ellul, The Ethics of Freedom (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 271.
2. Elsa Tamez, The Amnesty of Grace: Justification by Faith from the Latin American Perspective (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993). Justification in Galatians results in liberation and freedom (5:1), and thus expresses God's liberating justice (Exodus paradigm); see the works of Jose P. Miranda and Karen Lebacqz in the General Bibliography; also Stephen Charles Mott, "The Partiality of Biblical Justice: A Response to Calvin Beisner," Christianity and Economics and the Post-Cold War Era: The Oxford Declaration and Beyond, ed. Herbert Schollossberg, Vinay Samuel, and Ronald J. Sider (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 81-99. R. A. Kelly summarizes well this recent development: "In the 1970's attention to the meaning of righteousness was expanded through the contributions of Liberation Theology. Theologians such as J. Segundo, G. Gutierrez and L. Boff challenged definitions of the gift nature of God's righteousness and extended its power from personal justification to historical liberation. In addition Liberation Theology has reinforced justice as the primary meaning of righteousness, pointing to God's liberation of Israel from Egypt as the paradigm. With these challenges of definition, Liberation Theology has raised a significant biblical and theological challenge to traditional concepts of church and morality, including the ideology that connects Christianity and capitalism in North America" ("Righteousness" in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988, 4:195). Kelly indicates his preference for Luther's interpretation, perhaps because he seems unaware of the contributions in biblical exegesis and theology that support the newer, broader interpretation. In the same revised ISBE, see A. D. Verhey, "Oppression," 3:609-611--one of many subjects strangely omitted in The Anchor Bible Dictionary.
3. Thomas D. Hanks, "Poor, Poverty, New Testament," in The Anchor Bible Dictionary, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:418. Aside from 2:10, Paul's only other explicit use of "poor/beggarly" (ptokhûs) in Galatians refers to the "weak and beggarly elemental spirits" (4:9).
4. Carolyn Osiek, "Galatians," in The Women's Bible Commentary (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 334-335.

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