

A Different Gospel?

June 2, 2013

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Wayne Bowerman

It was actually 4 years ago this week that our family joined Hope Church! When we joined it was the end of a long search that a lot of seminarians enter into to find the “right” denomination, one with perfect theology that preaches the gospel, properly understood and with nothing that annoys them, at least too much. You wouldn’t think this would be such a difficult task. We all know there is one body and one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Right? Or as Paul puts it in Galatians 3: 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. This is a lovely description of unity as a gift from God and not something we ourselves achieve.

But that is not where the Lectionary lands us on this Sunday when we are participating in a community wide event meant to draw our attention our unity in Christ. Instead, we find ourselves this morning smack dab in the middle of one of Paul’s most red hot angry moments. The only one of Paul’s Epistles that does not open with thanksgiving. The language in this letter is so strong; let’s not beat around the bush, some of it is downright inflammatory. Paul accuses the Galatian Christians of deserting the Gospel for “another gospel” Then he adds “not that there is another gospel” Maybe you can hear him spitting and sputtering as he dictates this letter to his assistant. He calls the Galatian Christians foolish and bewitched. He even goes so far to say that he wishes his opponents would slip up and castrate themselves. But his harshest word is in the passage we read this morning. Not once but twice, Paul says if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed. Even if it is an angel. Even if it is one of us! So sure is Paul of his message that he curses himself if he should ever have any future contradictions.

Is this the same letter in which Paul paints the beautiful picture of unity by virtue of our death and resurrection in Christ? The same letter he describes the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness,

and self-control. It is the same letter that Paul condemns fits of rage and hatred as works of the flesh. Hmm... What is going on here? Why is Paul so furious and of all things, it seems primarily over circumcision?!?!?!?

I will not ask for a show of hands. But we would probably find that a lot of us, gentile – that is non-Jewish – male Christians in who were born into the American health system were probably circumcised shortly after birth. But Paul tells his audience “If you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you... have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

What in the world is going on here? As far as we can tell from Galatians and a parallel story in Acts 15, there was a debate in the early church about how Jewish one needs to be to be a follower of Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. Does one need to observe Jewish eating customs, observe Jewish sacred days? And for males, does one need to be circumcised in order to follow Jesus? There was a meeting in Jerusalem with Peter and James and John who were proclaiming Jesus primarily to Jews and Paul and Barnabas who had been preaching about Jesus to the gentiles. So important was this meeting that many have called this the first church council. The result of that council according to Acts 15 was that “after much discussion” a letter to the Gentiles was sent off with Paul and Barnabas that concluded “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹ You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.”

By no means is that a compressive list for a fully kosher diet! There is no mention of keeping Jewish special days and no mention of circumcision. So Paul went out and evangelized in Galatia and the people there, Paul says, “Welcomed him like they would an angel of God.” They received Paul’s message and Paul says they were running a good race! But sometime in-between that missionary Journey and the writing of this letter a group who Paul implies were sent - or at least claimed to be sent - from James came along and encouraged the men to be circumcised and the people to keep other Jewish religious customs and special days.

We would do well to remember that this was an intra-Jewish and intra-Christian debate. Peter, James, John, Paul and Barnabas – ALL JEWS! And ALL FOLLOWERS OF JESUS!!!. Their debate is about other followers of Jesus who

are not Jews, who are unlike them in some significant ways. Outsiders. The Galatians seemed to be caught in the crosshairs of this debate. It might make one wonder if there have ever been other instances when groups of Jesus followers held councils, meetings, conventions or synods where outsiders to the Christian majority were talked about rather than talked to and caught in the crosshairs of that anxiety producing conversation.

Church theologians throughout history have been unkind to Paul's opponents. Perhaps more so than Paul if that is possible. Ambrose called Paul's opponents "enemies of the Christian way of life" and said "Let no one be surprised that the Apostle when quieting ferocious characters was so annoyed." Paul called the Galatians bewitched; but St. John Chrysostom called them diseased. He said Paul was rightly urging his followers to renounce circumcision, to scorn the Sabbath." He also calls Paul's opponents in Galatia "deceivers" "corrupters" and compares them to the devil. His comments on the Jews in general were so disparaging that they do not warrant repeating here.

It is no secret that Martin Luther loved the book of Galatians and it would be hard to overstate the impact of this little Epistle on Luther's theology or the Protestant Reformation. Luther said, "The Epistle to the Galatians is *my* epistle. To it I am as it were in wedlock. It is my Katharina." Luther compared Paul's opponents to "murderers, adulterers, thieves" and like Chrysostom compares them to the devil. The dominant assessment of Paul's opponents in Galatia has been through Paul's eyes: they preached a different gospel! A different Gospel?

Perhaps out of reverence for scripture and fired up in his defense of Paul, John Calvin curiously comments, "It is no small evil to quench the light of the Gospel, to lay a snare for consciences, and to remove the distinction between the Old and New Testaments." Is this the same Calvin who wrote in the institutes "The Patriarchs... participated in the same inheritance and hoped for a common salvation with us by the same mediator... The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one in the same"

If we see this (at the very least) as a tension in Calvin's thought, I think we can trace that tension back to the New Testament. According to Matthew's gospel, Jesus himself claimed, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a

pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.” He went on to say, “Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

Perhaps those preachers who Paul calls “the circumcision Party” – were familiar with this tradition from Jesus! Perhaps they were familiar with how Moses-like Jesus appears in some of the stories that circulated about him in the early church, stories of fleeing to Egypt at birth, or ascending up a mountain to give the meaning of God’s law! Wait a minute, Paul! The law made us slaves? Neither circumcision nor un-circumcision means anything? Is not Jesus the hope our people have been waiting for? The fulfilment of the promises God made to Abraham, and to the house of David? The one who will lead us into the prophet’s vision of all nations streaming to the Mountain of the God of Jacob? But you want us to throw off those distinctive things that identify our people and Jesus with Abraham and Jacob, Moses and David. Trying to see through the eyes of Paul’s detractors in Galatia has led a lot of scholars in recent years to have some historical sympathy for them.

Now we know that Paul said elsewhere we should not break the law or go on sinning. In Philippians Paul seems downright proud of his Jewish heritage: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee. But if all we had was the Paul of Galatians, we might not have the privilege of such a comprehensive and complex picture Paul, the Pharisee who became a Jesus follower who saw circumcision of the heart as more important than circumcision of the flesh. Paul who declared to the Jews he became as a Jew, though he himself was not under the law all for the sake of Christ!

If you feel a little nervous, that’s oaky. I hope you feel some of the internal tension I have felt as I have wrestled with this passage. You can relax a bit. I am not going to ask you to sympathize with Paul’s fiery, harsh rhetoric in defense of his gospel. But neither am I going to defend the content of his opponents’ gospel. There is no other gospel! But the gospel Paul proclaimed is full of tensions. It is the deepest fulfilment of Jewish hopes and expectations. But it is for all. It is deeply sacramental: God has been revealed in a man, is received in earthly elements. Heaven has come so close and yet we wait a day of completion that all of creation

cries out for. But perhaps the deepest tension of all the gospel is deeply communal and deeply personal. As many as have been baptized in Christ now live in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, gay or straight, Pentecostal or Methodist, Reformed or Catholic. But the gospel is so very deeply personal: For Paul says it is no longer I who live but Christ!!! On one hand the gospel calls us to a deeper self-awareness: the Spirit convicts us of sin, Christ lives within us. But it also calls us deep into self- forgetfulness: for all have been made one in the waters of baptism.

No, I would not encourage us this Sunday when we are focused on Christian unity to pattern ourselves after Paul's fiery rhetoric when engaging the Christian neighbor whose experience appears to contradict our own. Neither would I ask that we water down the content of what we believe. But I would ask, I would beg of us all – especially when dealing with those individuals or Christian parties we might have sharp disagreements with – to remember that our personal experience of the living Christ within us is just that, deeply personal and shaped by our personal experiences as human beings within a particular time, place, culture from particular family all with our own baggage and vices and yes our own unique contributions, beautiful voice and gifts to this new community. The same is true of our neighbor. May we listen to our own hearts with deeper awareness and empathy and may we forget ourselves and extend the same awareness and empathy to our neighbor. The goal is to discern the Spirit of the living Christ amongst us and within each of us from what is just our own brokenness or jaded perspective. Our brokenness or what Paul calls “flesh” just might cause us to wish a curse or bodily harm on our neighbor. But the Spirit who leads us into kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control; the Spirit who makes us one by virtue of our baptism, calls us each one to deeper unity and deeper respect and empathy for each person. I will not wish any curses upon anyone. But I will say if you ever hear me proclaim a gospel other than this don't listen to me. For there is no other gospel. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.