

The Epistle or letter to the Galatians may be
the second writing of Paul the Apostle in our New Testament.
As you will hear in this series of six sermons on Galatians,
the theology expressed by Paul has pretty much become
the dominant theology of the church.

So where was Galatia and who were the Galatians?

As you can see from this map Galatia was an area
in the center part of Asia Minor, the country of Turkey.

Galatia was an area that Paul visited in his so called,
first missionary journey.

He embarked from Antioch of Syria.

You will recall that Antioch was more or less
the major sea port on the eastern Mediterranean
and it was a center of Christian work.

So who were the Galatians?

They were descendants of intermarriage
of indigenous people of the area
and - are you ready for this - Celts.

Yes, Celts in the second or third Century before the Common Era,
Celts invaded probably overland from Gaul.

You who have origins in the peoples
of Ireland, Scotland and France
may have distant relatives in Turkey, or at least might have.

Scattered through out the villages and towns of Galatia
were Jewish synagogues.

Naturally, a devout Jew like Paul would have gone
to the synagogue first on his preaching

and converting mission.

It appears that some non-Jewish people also
were among the converts.

Whether or not they were part of the synagogue is questionable,
and we simply do not know if there were Christian house churches.

What Paul does imply is that these “Followers of the Way”
were gathered, and it is to them that the letter was written.

Paul’s letters to churches and to Philemon

followed a structure that was common in his time.

The letter generally proceeded in an orderly fashion.

This one is largely an example of deliberative rhetoric
according to some scholars.

Deliberative rhetoric was employed

to persuade the audience to take some action in the future.

In deliberative speeches emotional language is expected
and is most effective.

The effectiveness depends on the audience
accepting the speaker’s authority.

In other words, the author must both grab their attention
and establish rapport with his audience

at the beginning of the speech,

and then at the end of the speech appeal to the deeper emotions
such as pity or empathy.

Paul clearly follows the standard advice

about arousing the audience’s emotions

so they will change their behavior by, on the one hand,
waking the Galatians up by calling them foolish

and invoking various curses at the beginning of Galatians,
 and only then going on to show that he is a trustworthy guide
 because he himself has gone through the experiences
 or actions they have had (conversion to Christianity)
 or were contemplating undertaking (observing the Mosaic Law).

We begin the letter with the salutation.

Gal 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man,
 but through Jesus Christ and God the Father,
 who raised Him from the dead),

2 and all the brethren who are with me,
 To the churches of Galatia: [NASU]

Paul is claiming to be an apostle

not by permission of the elders in Jerusalem but by Jesus himself.

In fact, the book of Acts records the conversion experience of Paul.

Our experience mirrors Paul.

We are not Christians because of permission of someone.

We made that choice ourselves.

Yes, most of us were baptized as infants,

but along the line as we became responsible for ourselves,
 we made a choice.

Paul goes on to greet the Galatians

and to talk of God as patron with God's agent, Jesus.

He says, "Grace and peace from God, our Father,
 and the Lord Jesus Christ,

who gave himself for our sins to set us free
 from the present evil age,

according too the will of our God and Father,
to who be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul's statement, the Lord Jesus Christ,
probably was a slam at the Roman Emperor.

The "Followers of the Way" were asked,
"Who is Lord?"

The response was "Jesus is Lord."

This was like a pledge of allegiance.

It was, of course, not said in public
but in the assembly of the faithful.

We are not under Roman rule,

but we do have to acknowledge whom we pay homage.

For example, yes, we are Americans, but we are also Christians.

Which comes first in our lives?

The usual practice in a letter, even one which is a deliberative letter,
what follows next is a thanksgiving.

The thanksgiving would be first directed at God.

In the structure of society of honor and shame,

God would be seen as the patron,

so honor and obedience would be stressed.

Secondly, thanksgiving would be offered
for the Galatians themselves.

Paul would normally bestow thanksgiving
for their faithfulness

and he would point out that he prays for them.

An example of this thanksgiving is found

in the Letter to the Ephesians. Paul says,

“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus
 and your love toward all the saints and of this reason
 I do not cease to give thanks for you
 as I remember you in my prayers.”

But in the case of Galatians, he launches straight into a diatribe.
 Paul is angry with the Galatians, and he makes no bones about it.
 The issue appears to be over the call for the Galatians
 to conform to Jewish initiation to include circumcision.
 To Paul this is the old argument that a “Follower of the Way”
 would first have to be Jewish
 and engage in honoring Jewish law.

Paul is saying, NO, and to back up his claim,
 he says “for I want you to know, brothers and sisters,
 that the gospel that was proclaimed by me
 is not of human origin;
 for I did not receive it from a human source,
 nor was I taught it,
 but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Paul’s view is that the call to be a Christian is a universal call.
 There is no prerequisite.
 Throughout the ages, this has been a challenge to the Church,
 and it is a challenge in our time.

Who is eligible to be come a child of God?
 Some would say that one has to conform to certain behavior
 in order to be fully included
 into the life and ministry of the Church.

Some would say that you have to look and act like me.

Some would say that you don't fit a binary model,
a yes or no model,
then you can't be a part of the body of Christ.

Paul would say that these are man made, not of God.

Later in the Galatians, Paul says,

“There is no longer male and female;

for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And if you belong to Christ,

then you are...heirs according to the promise.”

The Galatians and we are being encouraged to bring our authentic selves
to the life of Christian discipleship,
and God works with us as we are

to help us to become the best possible true self we can be.

Another phrase in this salutation is the phrase “the present evil age.”

What Paul will be pointing out is that Christians

who pledge allegiance to Jesus as Lord

are part of a new age.

This new age was inaugurated at the resurrection of Jesus.

We too are living in a new age, an age of eternal life.

We believe that the resurrection of Jesus enables us

to live here

and participate in life beyond this temporal existence.

When Jesus appeared to Paul, Paul realized

that the new age had broken into Paul's present time and place.

God had been and continued to be working in Jesus

to fulfill all the promises made to Israel

and to reveal God's self to the Gentiles as well.

Another characteristic of the new age is
that everyone would recognize the God of Israel
as the one true God.

There will no longer be any need for a distinction
between God's people (the circumcised)
and "others" (the uncircumcised),
so there will be absolutely no need
for anyone to change his status.

Our Gospel reading is about the centurion.

The centurion is a Gentile, of course,
though his status as a non-circumcised, non-Jew
turns out not to matter for his faith at all.

He makes this request of Jesus:

"Only speak the word, and let my servant be healed".

Jesus recognizes someone stepping into the new age
when he hears it, and he welcomes him.

No one should attempt to back up from that welcome.

Here's another poem by Steve Garnaas-Holmes.

The centurion says this not because he feels unworthy,
but he ignores his power, security and esteem,
renounces any fitness or deserving,
and instead relies wholly on Jesus' grace.

He knows it is not worthiness that brings healing:
it is Jesus' compassion.

It's a gift.

To be "worthy" is to be compared
to something or someone more or less worthy.

God does not compare.

We simply are, and we are loved.

We are not “worthy” of God's love. We don't “deserve” it.

We are simply, purely, for no reason other than God's love,
loved—way more than we are worth.

We are not worth anything,

but we belong, we are beautiful, we are cherished.

All of us. Just because. All of us.

It's not our worth that attracts God;

it's God's love, God's deep desire for us.

It's a gift. Everything is a gift.

My Lord and Life-Giver, I am not worthy;

but only say the word and I shall be healed.

Preached by The Rev. Perry W. Polk

Grace Episcopal Church, Fairfield, CA

May 29, 2016