

# FREE IN FAITH, FREE FROM LAW, FREE TO SERVE

Insights and conversation starters  
for St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians  
in eight sessions.

A resource for the *Book of Faith* initiative  
within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.



book of faith

Open Scripture. Join the Conversation.



**THE REV. DR. MARK I. WEGENER**

**RICHFIELD, MINNESOTA**

markwegener@scripturesampler.org

Copyright © 2012

All prayers are from *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leaders Desk Edition*  
(Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), pp. 60-160.

*The rest of this page is left blank  
so you can photocopy the pages back-to-back  
without losing the sequence.*

# FREE IN FAITH, FREE FROM LAW, FREE TO SERVE

## INSIGHTS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS FROM ST. PAUL'S EPISTLE TO THE GALATIANS

*Sometimes we may expect to receive a certain letter and yet hesitate to open it when it arrives because we do not know what it will say. Such may have been the situation sometime during the fifties of the first century, when someone in a village in the middle of Asia Minor received a small packet.*

*It contained a letter from Paul, who had rather reluctantly missionized in that region several years earlier, and it was addressed to the churches that arose at that time. We do not know who first opened the packet, nor do we know how its contents were used; we do not even know exactly where and when Paul wrote it. . . .*

*When the reader then perused the letter from the beginning, it was apparent that . . . [Paul] did not begin by giving thanks but instead immediately took his addressees strongly to task because they had so quickly fallen way from the gospel that he had proclaimed to them. . . .*

*We do not know the reaction of the first reader or the reaction of the churches to whom it was supposed to be read. Did they accept Paul's reproach, or did they feel themselves misunderstood and remain with that "other" gospel, which they perhaps did not consider so fundamentally different from the gospel of Paul? How did matters come to such a pass that Paul found it necessary to write this letter?*

— Dieter Lührmann, *Galatians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 1-2

As intriguing and perplexing as this letter may be, we too will be struck by the passion and anger its author must have felt as he wrote. He felt he was onto something fundamental and crucial for the life and faith of his people.

And we suspect that what he wrote over 2,000 years ago may have some relevance for us who live in a post-modern industrialized and electronically connected society today.

For present-day Americans, **the one truth which defines our existence is "performance counts."**

That is our culture's standard for evaluating success in every area of life—scholarship and education, marriage and family, business and politics, sports and athletics, health and wellness.

The attitude carries over into our religious and spiritual lives, where the assumption is that the way we behave determines the quality of our relationship with God.

Of course, the argument which Paul mounts to convince the people in the churches of Galatia to remain loyal to the gospel he had preached to them will obviously not directly address all the specific items on our agenda today.

For them back then, the matters of circumcision and other Jewish traditions were the test cases to

which he addressed the truth of the gospel. Such concerns are of little if any importance for us today.

However, **the way Paul fought for his position and the conclusions he reached are as radical and as liberating today as they were for the apostle and the Galatians.** For they assure us that our standing before God does not depend on our personal performance or achievement, and they invite us to live in a manner free from legal constraints.

His assertion that we are put right with God "not by works of law but only through faith in Christ Jesus" leads to the conviction that we are "called into freedom" so that "through love we can slave for one another." (Galatians 2:16 & 5:13)

If we take it at face value, this would give us a strikingly different way of living. "Performance counts" would no longer be the standard by which we establish our self-worth, even if "good performances" might still be the result of our new way of living.

And **how we get to that point is a fascinating story.** Whether Paul visited the coastal cities of the Roman province of Galatia earlier in his career (around 46-48 CE), or whether he visited the villages of the territory of Galatia in the

northern hill country of modern-day Turkey later in his career (around 49-51 and 52-56 CE) is debatable (although this study favors the later, northern dating).

Either way, **Paul successfully established small communities** composed primarily if not exclusively of non-Jewish believers. He did not require them to circumcise their men and boys, nor to observe kosher dietary laws or Jewish festival days.

**Then something went wrong.** Perhaps some other missionaries followed Paul, people who likely would have argued that if the Galatians were to worship Israel's messiah they should go all the way and adopt their messiah's Torah and keep its commands.

Perhaps some within in the congregations had trespassed in serious and offensive ways, for example, and the other members decided they had to adopt Jewish regulations in order to deal with their sinful situation.

In any event, **Paul** learned of their change in direction. He **wrote** from Corinth or Ephesus (ca. 55 CE) **to squelch what he considered an apostasy** which leads to a kind of slavery, and to reestablish the Galatians in the freedom of the gospel.

**His letter looks in part like a piece of Greco-Roman oratory.** It is as though the apostle, although not able to be present in person, is arguing his case in court. Paul, the defendant, states his case to the Galatians, the jury, in the presence of his opponents, the agitators who had cast doubt on his credentials and his message.

Paul marshals an impressive argument which still resonates well today. As we read the letter, there may be many details and allusions which we do not understand, but which would have been well known to Paul's original readers. We hear only one side of the conversation.

We may want to ask, "What did Paul intend to say here?" A better question is, "What would the Galatians most likely have understood?" This way **we can place ourselves in the role of auditors**, as people who are receiving a message and seeking to appreciate its meaning for our own lives.

We will learn again that the gospel of Christ Jesus means absolute freedom from law, which however does not mean license to live selfishly but freedom to serve one another in love.

Blessings to you as you rediscover what it means to live *Free in Faith, Free from Law, Free to Serve!*

– Pr. Mark I. Wegener, 2012

---

These exercises have been prepared in conjunction with the **BOOK OF FAITH INITIATIVE**, a movement within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, which seeks to help us become "more fluent in the first language of our faith, the language of Scripture." It acknowledges that we can read the Bible from four perspectives:

**Literary analysis** of discursive materials focuses on the content of the document's message. Ask: How can we outline the author's argument? What supporting evidence is used? Does the author appeal to personal experiences? Are quotations from the Old Testament brought into play? Can we detect any Greco-Roman or Jewish rhetorical devices?

**Historical analysis** focuses on the context in which the document originated. Ask: Who wrote this? When? Where? Why? To whom? Did the author use other sources? Does it agree with, or contradict, other writings? How could it have been understood and used by its original readers?

**Theological analysis** explores the ongoing message of the text. Ask: Do we hear it as Law, or as Gospel? Is it a word of commandment and condemnation, or promise and hope? Does it lead us to Christ? Does it apply to our personal, family and churchly lives? Does it apply to our community, social and political lives?

**Devotional analysis** connects our Bible study with our prayer life. Ask: Does a passage call us to repentance? Or to action on behalf of our neighbor? Does it help us feel closer to God? Does it lift our spirits, and offer comfort or encouragement?

Whether we use them separately or all together, these approaches will keep us in conversation with the Scriptures!

## FIRST CONVERSATION — GALATIANS 1:1-12

### APOSTLE

*O God, by the preaching of your apostle Paul you have caused the light of the gospel to shine throughout the world. Grant that we may follow his example and be witnesses to the truth of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.* [ELW prayer #55]

#### Read Galatians 1:1-5.

In the Greco-Roman world letters were most often dictated to professional scribes, who in turn composed them according to a stylized pattern. Every letter began with a *prescript*, which contained the names of the sender and the recipient, plus an introductory greeting. “Gaius, to Marcus, greetings” would be an example of a brief prescript. Often the names and salutation might be elaborated somewhat. “*Senator Gaius, to my friend Marcus, greetings to you and your family,*” for example. These verses are the opening prescript for St. Paul’s letter to the churches in the uplands of Galatia. Notice how he elaborates on each element in the prescript.

- (1) Paul identifies himself as an “apostle” who was authorized not by human authorities but directly *via* Jesus and God the Father, who raised Jesus from death. This reference to Christ’s resurrection comes “out of the blue.” What rhetorical impact do you suppose it makes at this point in the letter?
- (2) “And *all* the brothers with me”—why do you suppose Paul adds this comment, with this emphasis?
- (3) Instead of the customary Greek term “greetings” (*cheirein*), Paul chooses one of his favorite religious terms, “grace” (*charis*), and couples it with a familiar Jewish greeting, “peace” (*eirene* in Greek, *shalom* in Hebrew). How might this impact his readers?
- (4) Then, to add greater religious dignity to his greeting, he adds what appears to be a quotation from a liturgical source to describe Jesus. Elsewhere Paul almost always refers to sin in the singular (*hamartia*)—that’s sin as a power, Sin-with-a-capital-S. When he wants to refer to specific misdeeds, he calls them “trespasses” (*paraptomai*). The plural “sins” (*hamartiai*) in v. 4 is a clue that this is a liturgical fragment, as is the conclusion “. . .to whom be the glory into the ages of ages. Amen.” Again, how will this affect his readers? How does it impress you?

#### Read Galatians 1:6-12.

Normally the prescript in a letter is followed by a formal *preamble* with wishes for good health or prosperity and with prayers for the recipient. “I thank the gods for your partnership and pray that things may go well for you,” for example. Normally Paul follows this custom and adds a word of thanks for his readers’ love and good works plus a prayer for their continued faithfulness (see 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, Philippians 1:3-11, Philemon vv. 4-11, 1 Corinthians 1:4-9, Romans 1:8-15).

But not here! Paul skips the thanksgiving and jumps right into his argument. If the body of this letter follows the rhetorical conventions of a Greco-Roman speech, this would be the *exordium* or introduction, which usually tries to gain a sympathetic hearing and introduces the theme of the oration. Paul must have gotten their attention alright, because here he actually insults the Galatians and accuses them of rank apostasy!

- (5) Paul complains not that they were abandoning him personally, but that they were deserting and perverting the gospel itself. Do you get the impression that he was really, really angry?

- (6) So angry that he levels a double barreled curse at anyone who would add anything to the gospel he preached. *Anathema esto* means “let him be damned.” Do you think he meant this literally?
- (7) The contrast in v. 10 between “men pleasers” and “Christ slavers” is not merely a piece of rhetorical self-flattery. What does it suggest about Paul’s opponents? About the charges they may have leveled against him?

Here’s a hint: If the people in Galatia who (from Paul’s perspective) were “trouble makers. . .” If they had accused him of peddling an easy, watered-down version of the gospel, they may also have implied that he was merely trying to ingratiate himself with his converts. For the apostle, however, the issue was not about personal popularity but of faithfulness to Christ.

- (8) Paul’s main thesis comes in vv. 11-12. It anticipates the two main sections of the rest of the letter. “My gospel” (which will be spelled out in chapters 3-6) “was not validated by humans” (as chapters 1 & 2 will argue). Which do you think is more important, the content of his message, or the validity of his credentials?
- (9) Although Paul implies that the Galatians are in danger of turning traitor to the gospel, he still manages to refer to them a “brothers.” Note how this term is used and highlight it in the rest of the letter.

1:2, 11      3:15      4:12, 28, 31      5:11, 13      6:1, 18

Note also the term “pseudo-brother” in 2:4!

### APOSTLE

Obviously Paul was not one of Jesus’ original twelve disciples or apostles, and only once does the book of Acts barely refer to him as an apostle, even though the stories of his call and his missionary journeys take up 60% of the book. Yet he refers to himself as an apostle a dozen times in his undisputed letters. “Apostle”—from the Greek *apostello*, which means to “send out”—could also be rendered “emissary” or “ambassador.” The term describes someone who serves as the official representative of a higher authority. On more than one occasion Paul had to defend the idea that he was a genuine apostle.

In the Greco-Roman world, Cynic and Stoic philosophers often expressed the idea that they had been commissioned and sent by Zeus to proclaim their message to the people. In Jewish circles later rabbis referred to one sent on a mission as a *shaliach* and said that “the one sent by a man is as the man himself.”

Accordingly, the apostles were those who had seen Jesus and been commissioned by him—both the twelve disciples who had followed him during his earthly ministry, as well as Paul who had seen the risen Lord in a vision. Because apostles were representatives of Jesus himself, not merely authorized by the church, the term “apostle” never became the title of an ecclesiastical office, like “bishop” or “presbyter.”

Throughout the New Testament several additional ideas color the notion of the apostolate: apostles (a) are endowed with the Spirit; (b) they are sent on a mission; and (c) they are to proclaim a message. The others may or may not have shared the teachings of Jesus; Paul’s preaching was a gospel *about* Jesus, focused almost exclusively on his crucifixion and resurrection.

- Do these insights help you understand the background of the author of Galatians?
- Does a Spirit-led missionary message still characterize us today, as people who claim to be members of “the one holy catholic and *apostolic* church”?

## SECOND CONVERSATION — GALATIANS 1:13-2:10

### GOSPEL

*By your word, eternal God, your creation sprang forth, and we were given the breath of life. By your word, eternal God, death is overcome, Christ is raised from the tomb, and we are given new life in the power of your Spirit. May we boldly proclaim this good news in our words and our deeds, rejoicing always in your powerful presence; through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen. [ELW prayer #75]*

The next major section in the rhetorical outline is Galatians 1:13-2:14, the *narratio*. In Greco-Roman speeches, the narration would tell the story which leads up to the issue being argued. In this case, Paul relates four examples in chronological order which support the thesis that he was directly called by God to be an apostle, that he was not authorized by any human agency.

#### Read Galatians 1:13-17.

- (10) The **first example** Paul lists is his initial summons to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Clearly this refers to his experience on the road to Damascus (recounted in Acts 9:1-19, 22:1-21, & 26:2-23). Some call this his “conversion”; others, his “commissioning.” On the basis of these verses in Galatians, what would you call it?
- (11) Notice how Paul refers to his before-and-after arenas: “Judaism” *versus* “church of God.” He offers two reasons for his notoriety: (a) He persecuted and attempted to destroy the church, and (b) he excelled at hallakah and torah, that is, at traditional oral interpretations of divine law. Are both of these negative experiences?
- (12) Paul thinks of his calling not as a humanly authorized recruitment, but as a pre-birth act of God’s grace (see Jeremiah 1:5) which included a revelation of God’s Son “in me” or “to me.” “Grace” is a key term in Paul’s theology; highlight it here and elsewhere in Galatians.  
1:3, 6, 15      2:9, 21      5:4      6:13
- (13) Note that Paul does not claim to be an apostle on a par with the others; rather, he is to be an apostle *to the Gentiles* (see Isaiah 42:2-6 & 49:1-6). Is this distinction important?
- (14) Immediately, says Paul, he did not consult with “flesh and blood” or with church leaders in Jerusalem. Instead, he went south to Arabia (that would be the Nabatean Kingdom east of the Jordan River and the Dead Sea, not the desert peninsula of modern Saudi Arabia) and later returned north to Damascus in Syria. How do these details square with the report in Acts 9:20-30?
- (15) What Paul was doing in “Arabia” is anybody’s guess. Was he meditating on his call? Or was he beginning his ministry to Gentiles by trying to evangelize the Nabateans, who were like “second cousins” to the Jews. What is your guess? And how would this affect our reading of Galatians?

#### Read Galatians 1:18-23.

- (16) Paul’s **second example** is his first trip to Jerusalem after his call. The contrast between three years away and only two weeks with Cephas (Paul seldom calls him Peter) and the Lord’s younger brother James (not to be confused with either of Jesus’ disciples named James) emphasizes his independence from church headquarters. Why do you suppose he had to affirm this with an oath?

- (17) The district of Cilecia and Syria, bordering the northeast corner of the Mediterranean Sea, included important cities, such as Paul's hometown of Tarsus (see Acts 11:25, 21:39); Antioch, the third most important city in the Roman empire and the church center which supported Paul's journeys (see Acts 11:19-26, 13:1-3, 14:21-28, 15:30-35); as well as Damascus. We have no letters from or other reports about his activities during this decade. Don't you wish we did?
- (18) But obviously he was busy! And successful! If the Jewish believers in Jerusalem and Judea didn't even know what Paul looked like, but were thanking God for his work, then they obviously had no quarrel with his message and ministry to non-Jewish people, to Gentiles. Is that a fair conclusion?
- (19) But, again, it is impossible to match these details with the later version in the book of Acts (11:27-30). Is this a problem for you?

### Read Galatians 2:1-10.

- (20) Paul's **third example** is his second trip to Jerusalem some fourteen years later (or eleven years, if counting from his call), which is a long time to be acting as an independent apostle without checking in at headquarters! He went "by revelation," which means (a) he was sent by God, so (b) it wasn't his own idea, nor (c) was he summoned by the authorities. What do you think? Did Paul instruct them, or did they instruct him? It makes a difference.
- (21) Paul took two others with him: Joseph Barnabas, a Jewish philanthropist who helped found the church at Antioch and who was Paul's mentor (see Acts 4:36-37; 9:26-27; 11:22-26; 13:1-3; 15:1-3, 12, 22, 35), and—as a test case—Titus, an uncircumcised Greek convert (who is never even mentioned in Acts). The so-called "false brothers" who infiltrated Paul's private meeting with the "reputed leaders" apparently wanted him to have Titus circumcised. However, they would not have thought of themselves as "false" opponents of "the truth of the gospel," would they?
- (22) The "reputed ones" or "pillars" of the Jerusalem church—Jesus' brother James plus the disciples Cephas and John—shook hands with Paul, Barnabas and Titus as a sign of *koinonia* or fellowship, and agreed that Paul's gospel to Gentiles which did not require circumcision was just as legitimate as the ministry of Peter (! – see item 16) to Jewish Christians who, of course, were circumcised. Do you see any potential problems here?
- (23) The only proviso was that Paul's party should "remember the poor," which was apparently fulfilled when Paul and Titus later gathered a monetary collection for the church at Jerusalem (see 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8 & 9; Romans 15:25-29; but never mentioned in Acts).

### GOSPEL

The noun *euaggelion* and the verb *euaggelizo* mean to announce "good news." In Old English that was "good spiel" or "God's spiel," hence "gospel" in modern English. This implies a messenger who proclaims a specific piece of good news, such as a herald who returns from the battlefield with an announcement of victory, or an oracle with an encouraging message from the gods. In the Greco-Roman world *euaggelion* could refer to the proclamation of a new emperor, or to a decree granting some special privilege to a city or territory.

Paul uses the term over fifty times in his genuine epistles to refer to the news of salvation which is affected by the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ Jesus. For him, this gospel—unlike the law—is like a force which actually calls forth the faith which accepts that salvation.

- Can you see why the term "gospel" was used a generation later to refer to a specific literary form, a narrative which recounts the story of Jesus' ministry?

### THIRD CONVERSATION — GALATIANS 2:11-21 RIGHTEOUSNESS / JUSTIFICATION

*Merciful Lord God, we do not presume to come before you trusting in our own righteousness, but in your great and abundant mercies. Revive our faith, we pray; heal our bodies, and mend our communities, that we may evermore dwell in your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.* [ELW prayer #38]

- (24) Many scholars believe that the meeting in Jerusalem referred to by Paul in Galatians 2:1-10 is the same as the church council reported in Acts 15:1-35. In both cases the issue was whether Gentile believers must be circumcised. In both cases Paul and Barnabas represented the anti-circumcision side. In both cases Peter agreed with the decision not to require circumcision. If so, how do you explain why Cephas (a.k.a. Peter) acted as he did in the following episode?

#### Read Galatians 2:11-14.

The **fourth example** in the rhetorical *narratio* is a confrontation between Paul and Cephas in Antioch. (By the way, this is Syrian Antioch on the Orontes River, not to be confused with Pisidian Antioch in the highlands near Galatia.) Mosaic dietary laws do not permit Jews who observe kosher food practices to eat with Gentiles. Some Jewish Christians continued to avoid table fellowship even with Gentile Christians. Apparently the congregation(s) in Antioch, which included both Jewish and Gentile believers, did share meals together on a regular basis, perhaps including the Lord's Supper.

- (25) When Cephas visited Antioch—for what purpose we do not know—he, too, shared meals with the Gentile Christians. But when some more conservative representatives from James came from Jerusalem, Cephas kept distancing himself from the non-Jewish believers. It's no wonder Paul condemned him face-to-face! Have you ever experienced a betrayal like that? Have you yourself ever backpedaled under pressure?
- (26) Paul calls them hypocrites, that is, bad actors who perform contrary to their principles. The other Jewish Christians, including his good friend Barnabas, followed Cephas' example. Imagine what this must have done to the unity of the church in Antioch! Do you think this could account for the fact that Paul and Barnabas parted company (see Acts 15:36-41)?
- (27) Paul uses (invents?) words not found elsewhere—to be a “co-hypocrite” (*synhypekrithesan*), to “walk straight” (*orthopodeusin*), “Gentile-like” (*ethnikos*), “Jew-like” (*Ioudaikos*), to “Judaize” (*Ioudaizein*)—to condemn Cephas. Apparently to make law normative for one's behavior is contrary to “the truth of the Gospel (see item #21 above).” What do you think?
- (28) Paul is here quoting his own words to Cephas. Where does the quotation end? Here at v. 14? Or does it continue as far as v. 16 or v. 17? Or all the way to the end of the paragraph at v. 21? We get the impression that by the end of the paragraph we no longer have the incident with Cephas at Antioch in mind, but that Paul is now addressing the Galatians directly.

#### Read Galatians 2:15-21.

- (29) This transitional paragraph sums up the theological implications of the *narratio* and introduces the rhetorical *propositio*, the thesis that we are justified or made righteous not on the basis of “works of law” but *via* faith in Christ (or perhaps the faith *of* Christ). “Righteousness” or “justification” is a key term; highlight it (and all of v. 21) here and elsewhere.

## RIGHTEOUSNESS / JUSTIFICATION

Our Bibles can translate the same Greek term (an adjective *dikaio*s, a noun *dikaio*syne, a verb *dikaioo*) with two completely different English words—"righteousness" or "justification." Both in the Old Testament (where the Hebrew term is *tsaddiq* or *tsedeq*) and in the Greek world the basic idea is whether something is "right" or "correct" or "just" or "fair," in other words, whether it is in agreement with the law.

For Jews, God is righteous or just because he remains faithful to his covenant with his people, and people are righteous or just if they are faithful to God's law. It must have seemed daring for Paul to argue that God counts people as righteous or just on some basis other than how well they adhere to the law.

For English speakers, "righteousness" often connotes a personal virtue, such as inner integrity. On the other hand, "justification" implies an interpersonal relationship, whether one treats others justly or fairly. "Justify" also has a courtroom feel, as when a judge acquits a defendant.

- Which English word do you think best catches the nuances of this idea—"put right," "justify," "acquit," "rightwise," "do justice"?
- Does your choice work in all the biblical references?

- (30) Jews sometime referred to Gentiles as "sinners" simply because they did not possess the Torah, the law of Moses. On the **positive side** and in agreement with his thesis (see item #29), in vv. 15-16 Paul recalls that he and other natural-born Jews (including Cephas?) were put right with God when they came to faith in Christ. On the basis of **Psalm 143:2** he argues that no one is able to be justified before God. Is this a fair application of this psalm verse? Is it true, even if the biblical verse does say this in so many words?
- (31) On the **negative side**, in vv. 17-18 Paul deals with a potential disagreement with his thesis. If Paul puts himself in the same category as Gentiles, one could argue that Christ then becomes a "minister" or "servant of sin." With the equivalent of "Hell, no!" Paul rejects such a suggestion. He insists he would be a transgressor of the law only if he would revert to the law. Do you catch the logic of this?
- (32) On the **positive side** again, Paul thinks of himself as a typical case and outlines four theses which he will develop at some length in the next part of the letter.
- "Death to law means life for God." – a strange antithesis
  - "I have been co-crucified with Christ." – baptismal language
  - "Christ lives in me." – a mystical experience
  - "Life 'in the flesh' is now lived 'in faith in the Son of God.'" – a realistic assessment
- Did you notice the liturgical closing (see item #4): "...the one who loved me and gave himself over for me"? Nowhere else does Paul ever say that "Jesus loves me"!
- (33) Many Jews would have affirmed that the law is a gift of God's grace, given to the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. So finally in v. 21, on the **negative side**, Paul refutes the potential accusation that his law-free gospel sets aside God's grace. If so, Christ would have died needlessly. Really?
- (34) Lutherans are particularly fond of preaching "justification by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith." Do you think Paul's arguments support this?



- (41) The conclusion on the **positive side** in vv. 13-14 brings Christ into the picture. According to the law in Deuteronomy 21, anyone who “hangs on wood” is under God’s curse. This implies that Christ’s crucifixion “on your behalf” is a “redemption” or “ransom” from “the curse of the law.” This is a new idea. What do you think “redemption” or “ransom” means?
- (42) As a result, in Paul’s opinion, two things are now proven: (a) Abraham’s blessings come to the Gentiles in Christ, and (b) we receive the Spirit *via* faith (and by implication not through the law). So the rhetorical question in v. 5 is answered, don’t you think?

### Read Galatians 3:15-20.

- (43) Paul’s **third argument** is based on an example from common law. Once a person’s last will and testament has been properly ratified, no one else can annul it or change it. Similarly, argues Paul in vv. 15 & 17-18, the promise God gave to Abraham cannot be undone by the law which came to Moses over four centuries later, according to **Exodus 12:40** in the Septuagint. This makes sense, until you realize that a man can change his own will. Couldn’t God change his own promise by adding law if he wanted to?
- (44) Which promise are we talking about? In v. 16 Paul twists the clear meaning of **Genesis 13:15 & 17:7-8** (where the promise to Abraham’s “seed” obviously includes all his descendants) to make it apply to a single “seed,” namely, Christ. Apparently Paul is reading his own theological insights back into the Old Testament text. What do you think of this?
- (45) The bottom line, in vv. 19-20, is that the law is inferior to the promise because it is (a) subsequent to the promise, (b) temporary until “the seed” arrives, and (c) indirect, that is, it did not come straight from God but arrived *via* angels (see Deuteronomy 33:2) and Moses. Would Paul’s opponents have agreed that the law is inferior? What do you think?

#### FAITH / BELIEF / TRUST

Once again, English translations of Greek words can be confusing. *Pistis* is a noun; *pisteuo* is a verb. Obviously they have the same root meaning. But in our English Bibles the noun *pistis* is always translated with the word “faith”; the verb *pisteuo* is invariably rendered as “believe.” Thus in the New Testament “to have faith” and “to believe” mean exactly the same thing.

If I ask, “Do you believe three plus four equals seven?” you will answer, “Of course.” On the basis of your personal experience you know this is a true statement. “Do you believe Abraham Lincoln was the sixteenth president of the United States?” Again, “Yes.” You never met him personally, but the weight of historical evidence convinces us this, too, is a true statement. But if I ask, “Do you believe me?” you sense that I am not asking about a factual statement. In this case, I’m asking about whether you **trust** me.

In the New Testament, the basic meaning behind *pistis/pisteuo*, faith/believe is “trust.” Depending upon how it is used in a sentence, “trust” works both as a noun and a verb. Try it. Every time you read “believe” or “faith” substitute the word “trust.” It works 99% of the time.

- Does Paul think that we are justified by trusting God’s promises, rather than by keeping God’s laws?
- Does “trust” work when we are reciting the creeds (i.e. “I believe in God the Father,” etc.)?
- Does faith / belief / trust involve any knowledge? Any truth statements?

## FIFTH CONVERSATION — GALATIANS 3:21-4:20

### LAW

*Beloved God, from you come all things that are good. Lead us by the inspiration of your Spirit to know those things that are right, and by your merciful guidance, help us to do them, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.* [ELW prayer #49]

- (46) Paul's **fourth argument** follows on the third and is actually a digression on the proper role of the law. Paul's opponents could have accused him of suggesting that God's law must run contrary to God's promises. He denies this strongly (see item #31). Before you read the next passage, answer the question for yourself: What is the purpose of the law?

#### Now read Galatians 3:21-26.

- (47) If both God's law and promise could make us alive and righteous, then they would be competitors. But, posits Paul in vv. 21-22, the law can't do that, so the law is not anti-promise. Rather, the written law makes us prisoners of sin . . . but only until promise and faith and Jesus arrive. This is really more of a statement than an argument, don't you think?
- (48) In Greek culture, a "pedagogue" was not a teacher, but the slave whose job was to make sure that his owner's freeborn son attended classes and did his homework. The law is like that, suggests Paul in vv. 23-26. Until faith in Christ arrived on the scene, we were all guarded under the law. But now that faith has arrived, we are free children, children of God. Isn't that great?

#### Read Galatians 3:27-29.

- (49) The **fifth argument** appeals to the experience of baptism. Perhaps referring to the practice of clothing newly baptized people in a white robe, Paul affirms that all who are baptized are "one in Christ." Is this your experience and your understanding of the impact of your own baptism?
- (50) If so, baptism inaugurates a radical kind of social integration. Cultural (Jew/Greek), status (slave/free) and gender (male/female) differences are eliminated, at least within the Christian community. Is this your experience within the community of your church?
- (51) Racial and cultural differences were never erased in the Greco-Roman world, not even within the church. Elsewhere Paul apparently allowed for slavery (see 1 Corinthians 7:21-24 and Philemon), or at least he never actually opposed it. And nowhere else in the New Testament is there any suggestion that sexual distinctions are not important. Is this then an impossible utopian ideal? Or is it actually possible to live this out and make it a reality in our lives today?

#### Read Galatians 4:1-7.

- (52) The **sixth argument** expands on the example from common culture, the law as a pedagogue or guardian, introduced earlier (see item #48). Here Paul suggests that we are not merely slaves to the law, but slaves to cosmic forces, the elemental powers of the universe. What kind of forces or powers do you think he was referring to? What cultural forces enslave us today?
- (53) The creed quoted in vv. 4-5 says that God's saving action "in the fullness of time" is "the sending forth of his Son," who is described as (a) a typical human being "born of a woman" and (b) a proper Jew "born under law," for the twin purposes (b) of redeeming Jews "under the law" and (a) enabling all of us, including Gentiles, to be adopted as God's children. Where do you fit here?

- (54) Interestingly, the “redemption” mentioned here is not described in terms of Christ’s crucifixion (see item #41), but in terms of his birth and our adoption. Is this concept meaningful for us today?
- (55) The “sending forth” of God’s Son (v. 4) is matched by the “sending forth” of the Spirit of that Son (v. 6.) into the hearts of all who have been adopted as God’s children. Does this include you?
- (56) If you can call God “Abba” (an Aramaic term of intimacy like “Papa”) and really mean it, then obviously, suggests Paul, you are as close to God as children are to their father. Is that good news or what?

**Read Galatians 4:8-11.**

- (57) Paul’s **seventh argument** is in the form of an interrogation. Superstitious observance of dates on the calendar was typical both of the Jewish practices the Galatians were about to adopt and of the pagan religious practices they had abandoned when they became Christians. Either route is a kind of slavery. How could they possibly want to turn back?
- (58) It is an interesting turn of phrase: “You have come to know God, or rather to be known by God.” What is the difference? And is it a good thing?
- (59) So what do you think? Was Paul’s hard work bringing the gospel to the Galatians a wasted effort? Does your pastor sometimes imagine that his or her ministry is all in vain?

**LAW**

In Jewish tradition the greatest blessing God bestowed on his people came soon after their Exodus from slavery in Egypt, when he gave the law or *torah* to Moses on Mt. Sinai. The Hebrew term *torah*, which means “law” or “instruction,” can refer not only to the biblical rules and regulations for the people of Israel, but also to the first five books of the Bible in their entirety, “the Law of Moses.” These books served as the constitution of the people through their sometimes tortured history. They provided the directions which they should follow in order to enjoy the kind of *shalom* or peace and prosperity which God wants for his people.

Similarly, in Greek thought *nomos* or “law” was originally a religious concept and referred to the norms which Zeus and the other gods placed upon humans. Later, philosophers understood *nomos* to mean the rules and regulations which correspond to intelligent reason, and which establish the family and promote the wellbeing of the city and state. Thus, for Greeks as well as for Jews, to live by the law was a positive experience, not a negative obligation.

So when Paul equated adherence to “law” with a kind of slavery, that must have sounded like a radical upsetting of conventional values. Obviously in Galatians he is referring to “the law of Moses,” but although he knows that phrase (see 1 Corinthians 9:9) he never uses it here. In fact, he never mentions Moses in this letter; instead he bases his arguments on the figure of Abraham. Furthermore, over half the time Paul refers to “law” in the abstract (Galatians 2:16, 19, 21; 3:2, 10, 11, 18, 21, 23; 4:4, 5, 21; 5:4, 18, 23; 6:13), rather than to “the law” or “a specific law” (as in Galatians 3:10, 12, 13, 17, 19, 21, 24; 5:3, 14; 6:2).

- Do you suppose Paul avoided mentioning Moses because his opponents specifically appealed to Moses to make their case for adopting Jewish religious traditions?
- Was Paul advocating freedom from the Mosaic law(s) in particular, or from all law(s) in general?
- Being justified or counted as righteous before God is something that happens apart from law. But how about living justly and rightly in society? Does that happen apart from law?

## SIXTH CONVERSATION — GALATIANS 4:12-5:1 FREEDOM

*Sovereign God, ruler of all hearts, you call us to obey you, and you favor us with true freedom. Keep us faithful to the ways of your Son, that, leaving behind all that hinders us, we may steadfastly follow your paths, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

[ELW prayer #41]

### Read Galatians 4:12-20.

- (60) Paul's **eighth argument** is a personal appeal based on the friendship he and the Galatians share. Note the terms of endearment; he calls them "brothers" and "my children" and "begs" them to accept his ministry again as they did originally. Does this kind of emotional appeal work for you?
- (61) Some physical ailment had prevented Paul from traveling to Greece, so he stayed and evangelized the Galatians, who accepted him and did not "spit him out" even though his affliction may have been disgusting and revolting. Exactly what it was is anybody's guess; an ulcerating eyeball (see v. 15), epilepsy, recurrent malarial fever, migraine headaches—all these and more have been suggested. Could this be related to his "thorn in the flesh" mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:7?
- (62) The language in vv. 17-18 is fragmented. Apparently Paul's opponents were courting the Galatians overzealously and turning them against him as though he were their enemy. Have you ever encountered something like this among your own so-called "friends"? What did you do about it?
- (63) Obviously Paul was hurting. He claims to be like a woman suffering labor pains until Christ can be born for the Galatians, or *in* the Galatians. What a strange comparison! If you were in his place, what sort of picture or figure of speech would you use to describe your determination?
- (64) Finally Paul changes his tone. He wishes he could be present with them and not have to speak so harshly. Does this sound less insulting than previously (see items #1 & #35)?

### Read Galatians 4:21-5:1.

- (65) The **ninth** and final **argument** reverts again to Abraham, in particular to the story of his two wives and their two sons in Genesis 16, 17 & 21. If this were a strictly historical comparison, it would be obvious that the descendants of Sarah and Isaac are the Jews, and that Gentiles (including the Galatians) would be from the line of Hagar and Ishmael, on this order:

Sarah	free woman	pregnant by promise	Isaac	descendants of promise	Jews	free
Hagar	slave girl	pregnant "by flesh"	Ishmael	descendants of slavery	Gentiles	outcast

But instead of treating this historically, Paul says he "allegorizes" it (a strange word not found elsewhere) and twists it so that in the end Jewish adherents of the law are the slaves and the non-Jewish descendants of Hagar are the free children of God! This type of interpretation was not uncommon among Jewish rabbis. Do you think it is a responsible way of interpreting the Bible?

- (66) In vv. 24-26 Paul introduces a new assortment of ideas to make his point. One is that these are two "covenants," that God has two opposite ways of dealing with people. Another is that "the Hagar is Mount Sinai, in Arabia." This is nonsense, of course, unless he means that in Arabic (the language of Arabia; see item #14) *chadjar*—which means "rock" and sounds a little like "Hagar"—refers to the mountain in the Sinai Peninsula. In any event, this is where the terms get switched: "Slavery" is now associated with those who adhere to the law given at Sinai, while "freedom" is now linked to those who are God's people on the basis of "promise." Whew! How difficult can this get?

- (67) Well, it gets even more complicated. Paul adds another contrast, between the “present Jerusalem” (the actual city in Judea, the center of law-observant Jews) and “Jerusalem above” (“our mother” for those who are free and presumably not slaves to law). To buttress this, in v. 27 he quotes **Isaiah 54:1**, which originally encouraged Jews in exile in Babylon with the hope that desolate Jerusalem would someday have a thriving population again. If applied to Sarah and Hagar, one would think that Sarah was the “barren woman,” but for Paul the contrast is between “the one who has the husband” (that is, Sarah and her descendants) and the other one (that is, the free children of Jerusalem above), who can now rejoice and shout. Whoopee!?!)
- (68) According to **Genesis 21:9-10**, Sarah saw Hagar’s son Ishmael playing with her own son Isaac and consequently had Hagar and Ishmael expelled from Abraham’s household. Later Jewish tradition held that Ishmael was bullying or “persecuting” Isaac. In vv. 29-30 Paul apparently picks up on this and suggests that Sarah’s Jewish descendants continue to persecute Hagar’s Gentile progeny. What is your reaction to the spate of bullying incident reported in today’s newspapers? Does this help you appreciate the rhetorical effect of Paul’s argument here?
- (69) Finally, in 4:31-5:1, Paul concludes that “we” (that is, Paul and the Galatians united as “brothers”) are all free children of promise, not slaves of the law. So we must stand firm in that freedom, and not revert to slavery. What a great slogan! And what a grand finale to his entire argument! Agreed?
- (70) By the way, did you notice that Sarah and Ishmael were never actually named in this section?
- (71) In retrospect it seems that Paul’s “allegorical” argument seems overly complicated and even artificial. Is it possible that he wanted to end his presentation with a humorous joke?

### FREEDOM

The Hebrew terms for “freedom” or “liberty” (*chupshas* and *deror*) refer to people who have been released from their bondage as slaves, especially in the year of Jubilee. Similarly, the Israelites who were freed from slavery in Egypt are not really free; now they are slaves of Yahweh. The Jewish scriptures do not have the idea of inherent freedom or liberty, whether personal or political, in the modern sense.

Likewise, the Greek term *elutheria* originally referred to the status of a slave (a *doulos*) who has been emancipated. Such freedom is integral to the welfare of the state and is guaranteed by its laws. Later Stoic and Cynic philosophers defined freedom in terms of one’s personal self-determination. Just as individual people could be free from slavery, so a body of citizens could be free externally from enemies and internally from tyrants. Truly wise people could be free from their passions, and thus able to live without compulsion.

New Testament authors advanced the idea to include freedom from sin, from law, from the flesh, and even from death. The distinction between a slave (*doulos*) and a servant (*diakonos*, “minister” or “deacon”) is important, even though many English translations confuse the two terms.

In Galatians Paul takes a significant tactic. He could have developed his ethical conclusions from a Jewish perspective on the basis of law, but that would obviously been counter-productive in this case. Or he could have taken a Greco-Roman approach and talked about proper behavior from the perspective of “virtue” (*arête*). Instead he bases his ethical directives on the concept of “freedom.”

- Are the biblical ideas of freedom similar to our American ideals of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”?
- Luther argued dialectically that “a Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none” and also “a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Would Paul agree? Do you?

## SEVENTH CONVERSATION — GALATIANS 5:1/2-24

### SPIRIT

*Mighty God, you breathe life into our bones, and your Spirit brings truth to the world. Send us this Spirit, transform us by your truth, and give us language to proclaim your gospel, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.* [ELW prayer #36]

The next section in the rhetorical outline is the *exhortatio* (5:1/2-6:10), three series of injunctions for proper ethical behavior. Often referred to as “parenthesis,” ethical materials are a feature of all the major New Testament epistles. In many cases they are similar to the ethical teachings of the Greek and Roman philosophers, especially the Stoics. In addition, they also reflect the heritage of the Jewish moralists, both biblical and traditional. In Paul’s writings, “ethical imperatives” are always based on “gospel indicatives.” In other words, an announcement of salvation precedes and determines the nature of an ethical command.

#### Read Galatians 5:1-12.

- (72) Is v. 1 the conclusion of the *probatio* (see item #69) or the beginning of the *exhortatio*? In either event, it is a key verse; highlight it in your Bible. Note how the indicative “you *are* free” leads to the imperative “now *stay* free.”
- (73) “Look, it’s me, Paul; I’m telling you...” is a real attention-getter. Could this be the actual start of the *exhortatio*? This is the first time circumcision is actually named as the real issue between Paul and the Galatians. (By the way, the Greek term for “uncircumcision” really means “foreskin.”)
- (74) On the **negative side**, in vv. 2-4, Paul argues that those who feel they must be circumcised are committing themselves to the entire law, which means they are trying to be justified by the law and are therefore repudiating Christ and his grace. That’s pretty strong, isn’t it?
- (75) On the **positive side**, in vv. 5-6, is a terse summary of Spirit / faith / hope / righteousness. Been circumcised? Still got a foreskin? Neither condition matters. The only thing that matters is “faith active in love!” Did you know that this is the only place in any of his letters where Paul links “faith” and “love”? How does this work out realistically in your own ethics, in your own living?
- (76) Next comes a random collection of pointed remarks, in the rhetorical style of a diatribe:
- an athletic metaphor about running a race and not quitting (v. 7)
  - an assertion that God is not the one who is hindering them in their race (v. 8)
  - a popular proverb about leaven infecting an entire batch of dough (v. 9)
  - a personal word of encouragement not to change their minds (v. 10a)
  - a curse on unnamed trouble-makers (v. 10b)
  - a rhetorical self-defense of “poor me” (v. 11a)
  - a resounding conclusion that the scandal of the cross is thereby abolished! (v. 11b)
- (77) The bloody sarcastic joke in v. 12 may reflect the fact that in and around Galatia male worshipers of Cybele, a Greek nature goddess, often castrated themselves and turned themselves into eunuchs. Circumcision, suggests Paul, is but one step away. Do you think this is funny?

#### Read Galatians 5:13-15.

- (78) Freedom *from* law is one thing. But what is freedom *for*? To satisfy your own “fleshly” desires? No, says Paul. Rather, “through love slave for one another.” Is this an oxymoron, or what? Notice how 5:13 complements 5:1 (see item #72); make sure both verses are highlighted in your Bible.

- (79) Interestingly, Paul appeals to the law in **Leviticus 19:18** to summarize his non-law ethic of love for one's neighbor. The question is, who are your neighbors, and how can you serve them in love?
- (80) Then comes another gruesome warning (see item #77). Paul makes the Galatians' controversy sound like cannibalism! How effective is this rhetorically? Does this describe any arguments you have been involved in?

**Read Galatians 5:16-24.**

- (81) The **second portion** of the *exhortatio*, which contrasts the incompatibility between “flesh” and “spirit,” follows logically from 5:1 (see item #72) and opens with “now I’m telling you...” (see item #73). How does being “led by the Spirit” mean that we are “not under law”?
- (82) Paul lists fifteen “fleshly” vices:
- sensuality – prostitution, (sexual) uncleanness, lewdness
  - religious practices – idolatry, “pharmacy” (that is, sorcery)
  - conflict – enmity, strife, zeal, anger, self-seeking, dissension, sectarianism, strife
  - intoxication – drunkenness, “banquets” (that is, wild parties, carousing)
- Do you find yourself anywhere in this list?
- (83) Practitioners of these vices will not inherit “the kingdom of God”—a rare phrase in Paul, only here in Galatians. Does this End Time kind of language impress us today?
- (84) In contrast to the fifteen “works” of the flesh are nine “fruits” of the Spirit, ethical qualities which demonstrate the presence of the Spirit in one's life. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith / faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—notice how they are all about how we relate to each other, not about how we feel inside. How evident are these in your life? In the people you admire?
- (85) The concluding sentence, v. 24, is the inverse of the opening line (see item #74). Instead of rejecting Christ, those who are Jesus' people have “*crucified* the flesh.” What does this imply?

**SPIRIT**

The basic meaning of the Greek term *pneuma* is “wind” or “air” or “breath” (think of a *pneumatic* or air-filled tire; or *pneumonia*, which hampers breathing) and thus a basic life force. By extension it refers to a divine force or “spirit” which can move and inspire humans—poets, dramatists, philosophers, ecstatic prophets, and the like. The Hebrew equivalent *ruach* also means “wind” or “breath” and can also refer to God's creative power as well as to the “breath of life” which makes physical existence possible. Furthermore, this spirit helps leaders to govern wisely and courageously and enables prophets to speak truthfully and forcefully.

The New Testament develops the idea that the risen Christ is the one who imparts God's spirit—often called the “Holy Spirit” and referred to as a person—to the church and its members. For Paul it is the Spirit, given in baptism, who creates faith and also enables believers to live faith-filled lives; sometimes the Spirit works miracles and gives charismatic gifts. The influence of the Spirit thus enables believers to counter the natural ungodly tendencies of their “flesh” (*sarx*) and to be open to prayer and to loving service for others.

- Can you distinguish between “spirit” and “Spirit” and “Holy Spirit? Does it make a difference?
- Is the S/spirit a “divine spark” within you, as many people think? Or is it a God-given power which comes from the outside and is available only to baptized Christians?
- *Ruach* is a feminine noun; *pneuma* is neuter; Latin *spiritus* is masculine. Should we think of the Holy Spirit as a “she,” as an “it,” or as a “he”?

## EIGHTH CONVERSATION — GALATIANS 5:25-6:18

### CROSS

*O God, through suffering and rejection you bring forth our salvation, and by the glory of the cross you transform our lives. Grant that for the sake of the gospel we may turn from the lure of evil, take up our cross, and follow your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.*

[ELW prayer #47]

#### Read Galatians 5:25-6:10.

- (86) Paul introduces the **third portion** of the *exhortatio* by repeating the idea that Spirit-led people must be Spirit-marching people (see items #72 & # 81). Go ahead and highlight v. 25 also.
- (87) Then follows a loosely connected series of a dozen or so assorted injunctions and explanations:
- Don't be conceited. (v. 26)
  - If you're "S/spiritual," gently restore "trespassers" (not "sinners," see item #4). (v. 1)
  - Carry one another's burdens. (v. 2a) This is how....
  - ....you will fulfill "the law of Christ." (v. 2b)
  - Don't fool yourself into thinking you're really something. (v. 3)
  - Don't compare your performance with that of others. (v. 4)
  - Let each person carry their own load. (v. 5)
  - The catechized should share with the catechist. (v. 6) In other words, pay the preacher!
  - God will not be mocked. (v. 7a)
  - You will reap what you sow (v. 7b) Which means...
  - ... sow "flesh" and you'll reap corruption; sow "Spirit" and you'll get eternal life. (v. 8)
  - Don't get tired of doing good. (v. 9)
  - *Ergo*, now is the opportune moment to work some good for others, especially for those in "the household of faith," or "the faithful", that is, the house churches in Galatia. (v. 10)
- (88) Conceited people think they're better than others (vv. 26, 3, 4). Do you know people like this? Better yet, does this describe you?
- (89) Is the phrase "the law of Christ" (v. 2b) a pun or a joke? If taken literally, doesn't it contradict the entire point of this letter?
- (90) Do vv. 2a & 5 contradict each other? Which is it? Should we carry our neighbor's burden, or our own load?
- (91) Would your pastor think v. 6 is the most important verse in the Bible?
- (92) Do you practice vv. 9-10 in your own congregation?

#### Finally, read Galatians 6:11-18.

The *postscript* to the letter is apparently written in Paul's own hand, that is, in larger letters than those of a skilled scribe. It functions as the *conclusio* to the "oration" in the body of the letter. Just as the prescript introduced several of the themes in the letter/oration, so the postscript summarizes many of those themes. It incites anger for Paul's opponents, the agitators in Galatia, and arouses pity for the author himself.

- (93) First Paul accuses his opponents (a) of selfishly avoiding persecution as an illicit non-Jewish religion, and (b) of not practicing what they preach. Does this happen in our circles today?

- (94) Circumcision obviously and literally makes a mark on a man's flesh. Paul accuses the agitators of wanting to brag about their own and their converts' penises, and then repeats the assertion that it makes no difference whether a man is circumcised or has a foreskin (see item #75). Do you want to take this opportunity to discuss the medical and religious reasons for circumcising baby boys, or is this subject too sensitive and personal?
- (95) Notice how Paul injects an entirely new idea into the discussion—crucifixion and the cross. These are of ultimate importance, he says, with the result that the present cosmos is obliterated and a new creation arrives. Highlight the half dozen places this term occurs in Galatians.

3:1 5:11, 24 6:12, 14 (twice)

- (96) In conclusion, Paul sandwiches a final warning in between two blessings.
- “Shalom and mercy upon the Israel of God,” which has a Jewish flavor.
    - “Don't trouble me, for I'm the one who carries the scars of Jesus in my own body.”
  - “May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you,” which is distinctively Christian. Isn't it a good thing that his last word to the Galatians is to call them “brothers”?

### CROSS

Although “cross” (*stauros*) and “crucify” (*stauroo*) occur only six times in Galatians, this is clearly a key concept in Paul's theology. The practice of executing criminals by hanging them on a pole while still alive began with the Phoenicians and the Persians, who taught it to the Greeks and Romans. This particularly nasty and obscene way of killing someone—tie or nail them naked to a pole and crossbeam, and let them hang there exposed to public ridicule until they go mad and finally die—was reserved for slaves and other non-citizens who were guilty of insurrection and other crimes against the state. The Romans used crucifixion—for thousands in Palestine alone—as a tactic to intimidate subject peoples and ensure their compliance.

The four gospels all recount the crucifixion of Jesus, but they do not emphasize the physical trauma he must have suffered. Instead, they emphasize his mental anguish (Mark and Matthew), or his innocent martyrdom (Luke), or his “hour of glory” (John). Paul's favorite phrase, “the cross of (the) Christ,” is an oxymoron. “Christ” or “Messiah” refers to a descendant of David who would rule as the anointed king of the Jewish people. The Jewish Scriptures may have lauded the suffering of a righteous man, but nowhere do they anticipate a crucified king. Greeks, too, honored traditions of noble suffering on behalf of the state, but they would not have thought that the debasement of crucifixion was a royal goal. Paul moves beyond the physical, literal, historical understanding of Jesus' crucifixion, and invests his dying with deeper sacrificial, atoning meaning.

- How do you understand the deeper meaning of Jesus' death by crucifixion?
- Are there other legitimate ways of interpreting the crucifixion?
- What role does the resurrection play in your favorite interpretation of Christ's crucifixion?

- (97) Looking back over this entire letter, summarize how “justification *via* faith in/of Christ” relates to “freedom from law.” Does this liberate you from pressures to perform and to succeed at all costs?
- (98) It may help to rehearse the pairs of opposites Paul draws in this letter. (See the next page.)
- (99) Most importantly, how does Paul's gospel which says we are justified before God *via* faith and therefore free from law, plus its ethical consequence that we are free to slave for others, inform your own belief system and your own patterns of behavior?

(98, cont.) Dozens of times throughout Galatians Paul draws contrasts between two opposing ideas. Review the list below. Are all the pairs diametrically opposed to each other? Are they all black-and-white, or are there any shades of gray? Is the list complete? Is it accurate? Do these distinctions ring true to your own experience?

Truth of the gospel	Another gospel
Faith in/of Christ	Works of law
Righteousness	Sin
Life	Death
Church of God	Judaism
God pleaser	Man pleaser
Paul's ministry to Gentiles <i>via</i> revelation	Peter's ministry to Jewish people <i>via</i> human authority
Straight walking	Hypocrisy
Hagar & [Ishmael]	[Sarah] & Isaac
Jerusalem above	present-day Jerusalem
Freedom	Slavery
Spirit	Flesh
Foreskin	Circumcision
Blessing	Curse
New creation	Old cosmos

### **P.S. – WHAT ABOUT “FAITH IN/OF CHRIST”?**

Paul uses the phrase “faith *in* Christ” or “faith *of* Christ” four times in Galatians (2:16a, 2:16b, 2:20 & 3:22) and three times elsewhere (Romans 3:22 & 26, Philippians 3:9). Actually this is a two-word phrase, *pistis christou*, where “Christ” is in the genitive or possessive case. Translated literally, this would be “Christ-faith” or “Christ’s faith.” So the question is: Does this refer to the believer’s faith in Christ (where Christ is the object of faith)? Or does this refer to Christ’s own faith in God (where Christ is the subject of faith)?

New Testament scholars have been debating this for some time, in the context of a new perspective which sees Paul not so much as someone who “converted” and rejected his Jewish background, but more as someone who felt “commissioned” to bring the gospel to the Gentile world without the hindrances of nationalistic Jewish traditions. Some argue that the apostle was holding up the example of Christ, whose own “faith in” or “faithfulness to” God was to be followed by Gentile believers.

Others (including this study) maintain a more traditional position, which holds that Paul was urging his converts to put their faith in Christ, to believe or trust in him, in order to experience the blessings of righteousness and justification. Note that this does not mean that one should believe *in order* to be justified, but that righteousness is experienced within a trusting relationship with Christ.

In any event, let us pray that these eight conversations with Paul and the Galatians have served to add depth to your own life of faith, and that your faith, too, will become active in love.