

First Presbyterian Church
Galatians 1:1-10, “Rallying God’s Fractious Family”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/8/2024

In September and October we’re going to be diving
into a series on Paul’s letter to the churches in Galatia.

I promise we will not get stuck in the complicated stuff.

Instead we will discover Paul the pastor, struggling to connect
with these congregations he’s writing to.

We’re going to learn to see the early church
without rose-colored glasses.

There was no “golden era” of the early church when everyone laughed and cried
as they told the stories about Jesus that didn’t make it into the Bible
and they all knew exactly the right way to be the church.

That’s not what it was like! Which means...we have more in common
with the early church than you might think.

And we’re going to see how the crisis of faith
which compelled Paul to write this letter
can bring us back to what really and truly matters
in our own lives: genuine belonging in the family of God,
Spirit-empowered faith that is daily and vital,
and finding freedom to be
who God has made us to be.

To kick things off, I’ve got a question for you:

What would it take for you to write a letter,
addressed to each member of your family
(think of them in your head right now)
in which you say to them,

“I love you, and I will always be here for you,
but I have to say that I am astonished by how foolish
you are acting – don’t you know you are threatening
everything we hold dear as a family?”

What would it take?

There would need to be a crisis of immense proportions, right?

Maybe if they were all planning to join a pyramid scheme
and give a scammer all their money?

Maybe if they had been duped by a conspiracy theory
thought the world was controlled by a secret cabal,
and that *you* were working with the puppet masters?

Maybe if they were thinking about ending all their marital relationships,
selling their homes and becoming free-love hippies
with no commitments or obligations?

(I wonder which scenario would be most likely in your family?)

It would need to be ... something big, right? And if you had to write that letter,
what emotions would fill your mind and body?

What would you wake up in the middle of the night about? Concern, fear, worry?

Yes, all of those.

But also feeling excluded. Feeling left out of your loved ones' thought process.

Because in order for things to get to this point
where you are writing this dramatic, alarm-raising letter,
things must have been happening behind your back.
They...must not trust you. That hurts. It's hard.

Well, look: this is exactly what the Apostle Paul
says to his faith family in this letter.

Not just tucked away somewhere in the letter –
in the opening sentence after the salutation!

And for Paul, faith family means as much as blood family.

This was a very small, tight-knit, profoundly important
group of people he was writing to. He wrote,

**‘I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called
you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷which
is really no gospel at all.**

What was happening that was so profound that Paul
would dare use this kind of rhetoric?

Thanks to Paul's missionary journey's the church was spreading.

It spread to Asia-minor and around the north side of the mediterranean sea
toward Greece and Rome.

While these were largely non-Jewish areas, most of the new Christians were Jews
who had spread across these areas in earlier times.

So the early church was a mix of Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus.

Which is beautiful and wonderful – but it wasn't easy.

Because people wanted to know if non-Jewish followers of Jesus
(the Messiah of Israel) needed to follow the law of Israel?

I'm not diving into that question today,

but it's one that we will see come up repeatedly in this letter.

While Paul was travelling around setting up these communities of faith,
some people thought maybe he wasn't all that he claimed to be.

There came to be a division over the Jewish law
between Paul and those questioned his authority.

Some thought he really wasn't good enough to represent them,
they criticized him for his weak oratory.

From Paul's perspective, this was not just

“people were disagreeing on technicalities.”

Not making a mountain out of a molehill.

And it wasn't just getting his feelings hurt.

Paul was convinced that: gospel of Jesus Christ was in danger of being abandoned.

Paul makes it clear in this letter that the essential character
of Jesus' gospel was at stake in these communities.

Which means ... if Paul *didn't* write this difficult letter,
and his authority was trampled,
and other pseudo-authorities were lifted up, and a false-gospel
(which Paul says is no gospel at all!)
spread throughout this small, tight-knit faith family ...
the church might not exist today.

This means that just 20 years after Jesus' resurrection,
the whole thing nearly came apart!

And the biggest threat to Christianity wasn't persecution from Rome,
it wasn't the vices of debauchery, drunkenness, political power, idolatry
or anything else from outside the church.

The biggest threat to the church came from within—God's fractious family.
Paul is *saving the church* with this letter.

And we should carefully consider: are we on the verge of losing
the church to tribalism which threatens
the future of our fellowship today?

Are we being tempted by a false-gospel (which truly contains no good news)
in our own age?

That's what was at stake for Paul, and we get to see how he deals with this
major crisis in the life of the church.

It's an urgent piece of writing with specific concerns in mind.
This letter is not a measured and carefully
put together theological treatise that explains everything
like an introduction to Christian theology textbook.

No, in this letter Paul knows that everything is on the line,
so he drills into the very core of how we belong to God
and each other through gospel of Jesus Christ.

With that in mind, let's look at how Paul opens up this letter
and I hope you will notice the drama taking place behind what Paul says.

V. 1 “Paul, an apostle—sent not with a human commission nor by human authority, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—²and all the brothers and sisters with me,”

Right off the bat Paul addresses the authority issue.

He says I was not sent by men or by a man,
I was sent directly by the risen Christ.

Imagine you read a surprising new medical study that says,

“eating ice cream every night cuts your risk of heart disease in half.”

First, you’re going to celebrate and get a bowl of ice cream.

But while you’re eating your ice cream, what are you going to wonder?

Who did the study? And who paid for it?

Imagine then that you find out it was an association of dairy farmers,
are you going to take the information at face value?

Knowing the source of any piece of information changes how we interpret it.

Paul is making sure the Galatians know it was not any human entity
or interest who sent him out.

He is on a divinely mandated mission

with only the interests of God’s kingdom in mind.

And he’s not alone: He writes also in the name
of all the brothers and sisters who are with him.

This shows that Paul is no lone-wolf.

His authority and credentials are recognized by many other communities.

Verses 3 and 4 complete the greeting to the church in Galatia,

giving praise to God for rescuing the people from “the present evil age.”

Isn’t that what we all want? We look at the world, we hear of school shootings,
we hear of atrocities at home and abroad,

we fear for the integrity of our society,
and we want to be rescued from the present evil age.

How does God do that?

Not by rapturing us out, I can tell you that.

God rescues us by reorienting our lives from the world to Christ.

And that's exactly what he talks about next in v. 6-10.

Knowing what you know about the background,

listen for the drama taking place behind these words in v. 7-8:

Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let that person be under God's curse!

Do you hear what Paul is saying?

The declaration of good news that God has fulfilled

the promises made to Israel and has overcome sin and death

through the incarnation of Christ:

his life of love, his atoning death, and victorious resurrection,

does not belong to anyone but Jesus Christ himself.

The gospel cannot even be changed by an angel from heaven!

So whoever is trying to take the good news of Jesus and say,

"Well, yeah...but I mean, if you really think about it..."

Paul says, "Let that person be under God's curse."

Then he repeats it verbatim in v. 9!

This is like when you come across a comment on the internet

that's in all caps and you wonder "Is that person okay?"

No, he's not okay, because the DNA of the gospel was being altered.

If you change the DNA in one generation, then guess what?

It gets passed on to the children in the next...and the next...

and the next.

Paul saw this danger 20 years after the resurrection of Jesus.

Do you think it is any less of a threat 2,000 years later?

We have to continually check ourselves:

are we living by faith in Christ alone?

Or have we been thrown into confusion by adding something else to the gospel?

Next week we'll get into more specifics on how it was being altered.

Last line hurts the most. ¹⁰**Am I now trying to win human approval,
or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people?**

**If I were still trying to please people,
I would not be a servant of Christ.**

Paul is writing this desperate letter to his faith family.

He knows that they have been turned against him, and it hurts him so much.

He knows that he could win their approval simply by making room
for these new perspectives, by turning a blind eye.

But he has to be clear – he's not here to please people. He's a slave to Jesus Christ.

The early church was a mess. People think church dysfunction is a new feature,
a recent development that is making things weird.

So many people today say,

“You know, I love Jesus, but I just have a hard time with the church.”

Or, “I don't want to get sucked into church politics
because everything looks good on the surface,
but once you look inside it gets ugly.”

Or more simply, “I look at all the division caused by religion,
and I don't want any part of it – I'm more spiritual than religious.”

What if Paul had said that? What if Paul thought,

“Fine, if you don't like me, if I'm not good enough for you,
if you've found a better preacher with the answers
you want to hear, then go for it.

“Many paths to God you know.

I'm more spiritual than religious, anyway – what do I care.”

If Paul had done that, the whole thing comes crashing down.

Of course, God could have found someone else, but the point is
someone needed to hold the line and say,
*“Salvation is found by grace through faith in Christ
and nowhere else.”*

That’s been true in every generation. And it has to be done from within.
If we all go the easy way, then who is left to rally God’s fractious family,
who is there to embody the way of Christ for the next generation?
Who has been that voice for you?
Who has been willing to (so to speak) write you the difficult letter
you needed to hear even though you didn’t want to hear it?

And ... who is our congregation called to reach out to?
The church still needs to be rallied around the person of Jesus.

I’ve got my issues with the Apostle Paul.
He can be very confusing and sometimes he wrote things that are upsetting.
Predestination is not a fan favorite.

But today Let’s give God thanks for the Apostle Paul.
Let’s give God thanks for all the others throughout the ages
(men and women, from every nationality,
most of whom were not written down in the history books)
who have sacrificed their reputation, their personal pride,
their financial wellbeing, to embrace the foolishness of faith.

The faith we inherit did not just magically arrive in our lap –
it came by the Holy Spirits work in the church. In churches just like ours!
Mark this community well, because God has plans for us.