

The letter to the Galatians is some of Paul's best material...and while it has had a huge influence on the life of the church over the centuries, the church often forgets the gospel of grace over trying to implement the law of right belief. It's amazing what someone can write when they're very angry.

Paul is writing to a group of Celtic Christians, gentiles, who have just come to the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ recently. Paul spent time with them; helped them to establish their brand of church, and entrusted them with his instruction. And now, to his horror, they are beginning to listen to other Christian leaders, likely of Jewish tradition, who are saying they must be immersed in the rules of the law, before they can come to Jesus. The first part of that immersion is circumcision.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ."

According to Paul, the gospel of Christ is a gospel of grace. Those others, who had come calling to preach a gospel of the law before the gospel of grace got it wrong, according to Paul, and he's flipping out that his converts have turned so quickly. What is it about the gospel of the law, with the safety of its rules and consequences that compels the church to keep returning, especially when we're anxious? What is the other good news (not that there is any, according to Paul) that we continue to believe about strict adherence to an old law. Like the wilderness wanderings of the ancient Israelites, why do frightened people always want to return to Egypt?

These are compelling questions for the church in 2013. If you've been following Gary Paterson's blog these past few weeks, you'll know the church is getting increasingly fussed. Gary is Moderator of the United Church of Canada; he's our spiritual leader and under a decision of the 31<sup>st</sup> General Council, Gary is spearheading a national comprehensive review of the denomination.

Everything is on the table: what we believe, how we govern ourselves, preparation and fitness for ministry, pension programs, and effectiveness of ministry. You see the United Church of Canada has been in a freefall for the past 40 years. Since the 70s we've been losing members, we've been losing heart, we've been losing our place in the Canadian fabric as the voice of social justice, and we are becoming completely

irrelevant. Scary but true and the church's response for most of those 40 years, even after hearing the noise of the statistics, is to keep doing what we've been doing expecting a different result.

We've wanted to hold the way we have always done it as the way of the future, forgetting that the letter of the law has been replaced by the gospel of grace. That's what's happened to the Ephesians. Paul preached a gospel of grace through Jesus Christ— not learned in any seminary but by a direct experience of grace and only a few short years later, he's horrified and angry to learn that the Galatians are paying attention to those who would have them return to the law – earning their way into God's good books.

It's by grace alone, according to Paul. Not Works, Grace – faith – modelled in Jesus Christ. What's so interesting about this grace is that often, especially lately, the last place its to be found is in the church...especially when we're afraid.

It's not surprising to some that I've been hobbling around here for the past two or three days with a pretty severe back spasm. Not wanting a repeat performance of two years ago, I beetled my way onto Dawn Burnell – Powers' massage table, inviting her to walk me through a story of my wellness. Somehow, I'm not sure why, she talked about my affinity to Galatians. "You love Galatians," she said, "everytime I'm around you, I hear something about Paul's letter." She kept at it. "The church loves Galatians for the ideas it presents, but as soon as an in depth study is done, the church quickly return's to the law."

Then she asked me a pointed question. "What if you, Blair, actually believed in the grace of God?" The question caught me in my throat and I wept. She said, "if we actually believed in the full grace of God, we probably would not be embodied." Do you hear that? If we actually believed that the grace of God, the gospel about which Paul reminded the Galatians, we would probably not be embodied. The energy mass that is our bodies would be so open and non-boundaried in love, we would be completely open...like a gas.

I wept because as much as I want to believe I live in grace, when I'm anxious and uncertain, and frightened, I too want to return to Egypt, to the place where everything is predictable and easier. In my own fear and anxiety, I project all of it onto other people and get it right back. Moses used to call his people stiff-necked as they whined about wanting to be back in Egypt. I carry the consequence of all of my own fear in my lower back. I get stiff backed.

I wept because if I actually believed in the grace of God in Christ, I would stop believing I have all the answers for the once and future church, that I have all the solutions for how we're going to be church differently. I would stop believing that the way I see spirituality, incarnation, is the only way. Physically, I think I'd be supple – bending, pivoting, rotating, head high seeing Christ in everyone, planted firmly, grounded in this grace.

I'm looking forward to exploring Paul's contention with the institutional church in the coming weeks. As we go into all the decisions of our annual meeting, it will be useful for us to wonder whether the spirituality of Christ, the grace of Christ is alive and breathing here, or whether Christ has long left the building and is in ministry out there, in places we don't even recognize. Let's be curious about these matters. I'm convinced that the grace of Christ is. Amen.