

Power in the Spirit Bible Study on Galatians, the Epistle of Freedom

5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Gal 5:1 NRS)

Paul begins this letter to the Galatians with a greeting unlike any of his other letters: no praise and thanksgiving for the Galatians but a theologically pointed benediction which introduces the apocalyptic "antinomy" (J. L. Martyn) between the present evil age and the intervening new creation

Paul an apostle-- sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead-- ² and all the members of God's family who are with me, To the churches of Galatia: ³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Gal 1:1 NRS)

Paul transitions immediately to the danger he sees in developing his congregations: interlopers, claiming better credentials, want the Gentile Galatians to complete their conversion by undergoing circumcision. In fact their claim to complete the gospel with circumcision stands for another gospel entirely no longer of the grace alone of Christ alone received by faith alone a quid pro quo in which God does his part of human beings to their part

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-- ⁷ not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! ⁹ As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed! ¹ (Gal 1:1 NRS)

We get our first hint what Paul means by freedom in this passage following: Paul has been liberated from people-pleasing. He has been liberated to be a God pleaser. He will sacrifice neither his conscience nor intellect to any creature in heaven and earth because his conscience is captive to the word of God and his mind to thinking about the implications of God's liberating act in Christ

¹⁰ Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ. ¹¹ For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; ¹² 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. ¹³ (Gal 1:1 NRS)

After a long autobiographical section culminating in Paul's account of his face-to-face confrontation here who had eaten with the Gentiles until for fear of the circumcision-kosher party he separated from sharing table with them, Paul states the argument for justification by faith on the grounds that it does not make the cross of Christ superfluous but rather the radical act of divine grace which liberates.

Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified. ...¹⁹ For I through the law am dead to the law, that I might live unto God. ²⁰ I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me. ²¹ I do not frustrate the grace of God: for if righteousness *come* by the law, then Christ is dead in vain. (Gal 2:1 KJV)

Now Paul delves deeply into the cross of Christ as the liberating deed which brings the Spirit of God to do battle against the unbelief of human self-reliance (the "flesh ").

3:1 O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified? ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? ⁴ Did you experience so many things in vain? -- if it really is in vain. ⁵ Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith? ⁶ Thus Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." (Gal 3:1 RSV)

The reference to Abraham is important for two reasons. First, the interlopers undoubtedly appealed to Genesis 18 where the first circumcision of father Abraham occurred. Second, Paul has discovered within the Torah an internal tension between the history of promise initiated with Abraham and his representative faith in the promise by which God regarded him as righteous and the history of the works of the law subsequent to and in some tension with God's gratuitous initiative in the promise. It is an "antinomy" between blessing given by promise to faith and curse which falls upon all who fail wholly to fulfill the law of works

⁹ So then, those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith. ¹⁰ For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them." ¹¹ Now it is evident that no man is justified before God by the law; for "He who through faith is righteous shall live"; ¹² but the law does not rest on faith, for "He who does them shall live by them." ¹³ Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us -- for it is written, "Cursed be every one who hangs on a tree" -- ¹⁴ that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal 3:1 RSV)

One of the most difficult but also interesting passages follows in which Paul apparently distances the giving of the law on Mount Sinai from God, saying that it was instead mediated by angels to serve as a pedagogue until the promise should be delivered in the fullness of time to people

Paul's meaning there may reflect a second temple Jewish idea that God assigned the governance of many nations and peoples to various angelic powers each of which developed its own set of Israel regulations corresponding to their cultural particularities. What is brand-new is Paul's hint that the law of Moses belongs in the same category: a positive law given specifically to the children of Israel.. But all of these powers are enslaving powers which have now been undone by the breakthrough of the new creation in Christ which has liberated from their grip.

¹⁹ Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained by angels through an intermediary. ²⁰ Now an intermediary implies more than one; but God is one. ²¹ Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. ²² But the scripture consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. ²³ Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. ²⁴ So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a custodian; ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Gal 3:1 RSV)

Carefully note here how Paul juxtaposes the self-revealing and humanly liberating act of God in Christ in the Trinitarian way in opposition to the enslaving powers and principalities.

³ So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. ⁴ But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, ⁵ to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. ⁶ And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" ⁷ So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir. ⁸ Formerly, when you did not know God, you were in bondage to beings that by nature are no gods; ⁹ but now that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits, whose slaves you want to be once more? ¹⁰ You observe days, and months, and seasons, and years! ¹¹ (Gal 4:1 RSV)

Having made his case for the necessity of the crucified Christ to effect the glorious liberty of the children of God, Paul as it were ups the ante and makes the conflict radical: either/or!

⁴ You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. ⁵ For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶ For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love. (Gal 5:1 NRS)

Paul does not teach the so-called "third use of the law" but as I prefer to say a "second use of the gospel." If the first use of the gospel is to justify by faith alone in Christ alone, its second use is to deliver the spirit for newness of life. This is the text behind Martin Luther's famous treatise on the freedom of the Christian: what is Christian freedom? It is the freedom to love!

¹³ For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. ¹⁴ For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another. ¹⁶ Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. (Gal 5:1 NRS)

At the end of the letter to the Galatians Paul once again articulates this radical either/or, the apocalyptic "antinomy." The Israel of God belongs neither to Jew nor to Gentile but includes both wherever and whenever the new creation has grasped hold of bound beings and set them free to love. This is Paul's "canon" – his rule of faith for the churches.

¹⁴ May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! ¹⁶ As for those who will follow this rule-- peace be upon them, and mercy, and upon the Israel of God.
(Gal 6:1 NRS)

What knowledge of God (theology) does this yield?

- "God is the God of the humble, the miserable, the afflicted, the oppressed, the desperate, and of those who have been brought down to nothing at all. And it is the nature of God to exalt the humble, to feed the hungry, to enlighten the blind, to comfort the miserable and afflicted, to justify sinners, to give life to the dead, and to save those who are desperate and damned. For he is the Almighty Creator, who makes everything out of nothing. In the performance of this, his natural and proper work, he does not allow himself to be interfered with by that dangerous past, the presumption of righteousness, which refuses to be sinful, impure, miserable, and damned wants to be righteous and holy." – Martin Luther (LW 26:314)