

Galatians 3 & 4 – intimacy with God

Mark Edgecombe

Let's begin by looking at chapter 4, verse 19. Here, Paul writes to the Galatians: "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you."

Last week I mentioned Paul's tone in this letter – one of exasperation – and it's a tone which seems to come out in this particular verse from today's reading. It's there at the very start of chapter 3 as well – "You foolish Galatians!" But I'd like us to spend a moment or two considering Paul's words about childbirth: "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you".

In spite of his exasperation, Paul has a very real tenderness for his readers, and he claims to be again in the pains of childbirth for them, as if he has been once already. Perhaps those of you who are parents will understand this better than those of us who are not – the responsibility and emotional attachment brought on by parenthood never really disappear, I guess, for as long as the child is alive. I wonder how many parents go repeatedly through the pains of childbirth for their children.

I'm particularly interested in the phrase "until Christ is formed in you". What does Paul mean by this? It seems fairly clear that the Galatians have already become Christians – they've had their conversion experience, thanks to Paul's own preaching. Since then though, their faith in Christ has been undermined by the preaching of others, who want them to revert to the Jewish law as the way of marking themselves out as belonging to God.

What does it mean for Christ to be formed within someone? Within the Galatians? Within you? I understand it to mean something like this: for the character and mission of Jesus Christ to be fully realised within us; for us to become more like him; for our inner motivation to be the same as his; for

us, like him, to be able to say in each and every situation, “Not my will, but yours, Father God.” Perhaps it also hints at the intimacy of relationship we ought to enjoy with God the Father. Just as Jesus displayed such closeness to God during his lifetime, so might we.

Faith and law

Chapters 3 and 4 of Galatians develop at length the distinction between faith and the law that is for Paul a defining distinction between the old Judaism, of which he himself was formerly a leading proponent, and the new Judaism, as instituted by Jesus Christ. And the new Judaism, Paul points out, has its roots way back in God’s promise to Abraham, a promise which pre-dates the giving of the law by some 430 years. So in chapter 3, Paul develops his argument – that it is by faith in Jesus Christ, and not by adherence to the Jewish law that we become members of God’s family. Paul supports this claim by pointing to Abraham, who was credited with righteousness not because he obeyed any law, but because he had faith in God. This is what’s going on in verses 6-9 of chapter 3: “those who believe are children of Abraham”.

A return to the Jewish law may not be a particular temptation for us. A greater temptation for us, perhaps, is to replace the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ with a pluralistic worldview. This temptation to opt into a pluralistic worldview is, in my view, largely the result of a false understanding of Christianity in particular, and religion more generally.

In his treatment of Galatians, Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham, writes that “Most people rooted in contemporary Western culture ... assume ... that all religions are basically trying to be about the same thing.”¹ What I think he means is that, most people who have grown up in a culture such as ours have an understanding that at the end of the day, religion is basically about sorting out where you’ll go when you die.

¹ N.T. Wright, ref TBS

It seems to me that many New Zealanders today see religious people as being primarily concerned with the question of ‘where’ll they go when they die’. So choosing a religion from among the many options, if one is inclined to do so, becomes much like any other choice in life: choosing a rental car company, or an airline, or a brand of toothpaste. Any one of them will do the job you need done – getting you to Lumsden, or London, or that little bit closer to that girl or boy you’re keen on. And so armed with this view of religion, we come to texts like Paul’s letter to the Galatians, and conclude that this big debate about faith and the law is a debate about which will get you to heaven – faith in Jesus, or obedience to the Jewish law? We then update this debate to a trade-off between faith in Jesus, or good works? And then we get embroiled in pointless arguments about what if Hitler had converted to Christianity on his death bed – would his declaration of faith fit him for heaven instead of the hell he so clearly deserved?

That is not what this argument over the respective merits of faith and the law is about. Paul is arguing not about how you’ll get to heaven, but about the truly distinctive marker of a member of the family of God. And that marker is not circumcision, not Jewish cultural practices, but faith in Christ.

Repercussions of Paul’s teaching

This is important for a couple of reasons. The first is that it makes God’s family inclusive. Admittance to God’s family is not limited to those who submit to Jewish identity markers, but is open to all. So we read in verse 14 that God “redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus”. And so we also read the great words at the end of chapter 3, one of the most memorable passages of the whole letter, and perhaps the most radical: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

The second reason is that it is faith in Jesus Christ, and not adherence to the law, that has the power to bring about transformation in the lives of individuals and communities. We're not talking about going to heaven, here. We're talking about heaven coming to earth. How does it happen?

Consider what your version of heaven on earth looks like. Have you thought about it? If the world was as it should be, what would it look like? And what would it take to make it that way?

One of my favourite films is *Traffic*, by Steven Soderbergh, and not merely for the fact that it features Catherine Zita Jones. The film is about the heroin trade in North America, and is set alternately in the American east, California, and across the border in Mexico. The star of the film is a Mexican plain clothes police officer, Javier. While all those around him are prone to taking bribes from Mexican drug runners in return for their silence and assistance, Javier remains incorruptible. Single-handedly, it seems, he tries to stand in the path of powerful cartels which are used to getting their way. His attempts to oppose drug trafficking are revealed to be futile in the face of bigger and more powerful forces, but he remains resolute. When asked why, he says, in his lilting Mexican accent, words to the effect of: "I want to be able to go to the park at night and watch kids playing baseball." It's a pretty simple desire, quite a mundane one, but it speaks volumes. Javier longs for a society in which the most vulnerable citizens are free to play, in public, and without fear.

In Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, the doddery old counsellor, Gonzalo, describes his perfect society in these terms:

*No kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation, all men idle, all,*

*And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty.*²

Basically, Gonzalo envisions a world in which there is no need for work, no need for law, no need for ownership or trade, and indeed no need for sovereignty. It's a vision which depends upon people being without self-interest. As soon as self-interest creeps in, the whole society he has dreamed up comes crashing down.

The perfect world dreamt of by Christians *does* have a sovereign – it is Jesus Christ himself who is its Lord. And this is a Lord who institutes his reign not through legislation, but through a faith relationship. The perfect world dreamt of by Christians springs from the transformation of individuals and communities that comes through faith in the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. You can't legislate such transformation. You can't legislate the coming of the Spirit of God.

The inability of the law to bring about transformation

A final illustration may help to clarify this more...

English Departments in schools around New Zealand administer an internal assessment task known, in the jargon, as Unit Standard 12905. The task is worth four credits, or about 16% of a total course grade. This is what motivates students to do it. It requires them to read nine books, and to write a response to each book they've read. Obviously the aim is to foster a love of reading among New Zealand teenagers. If the task *really* took off, it would produce generations of New Zealand students who opted to read books in their spare time, who were fully literate, rich in vocabulary, thoughtful, empathetic, and who had internalised important truths about human thought and behaviour. There would be no more racists in our country, no more bullies, no more in-groups and out-groups, no more

² William Shakespeare. *The Tempest*. (Methuen: 1901). Act 2, scene 1, lines 144-152. Pages 50-51.

rejects. And even no more *Shortland Street*, perhaps. In short, New Zealand would be a better place.

But guess what actually happens. What actually happens is this. Students look for ways of satisfying the requirements of this task without ever risking becoming better readers. They ask questions like:

- How long does each book have to be?
- How long does each reading response have to be?
- Can I include books that I read last year?
- Can I include books that we have read in class?
- Can I include books with no words in them?
- What about comic books?
- What about Doctor Seuss?
- What if I read it off the net, and not out of a book?

Most kids do not develop a love of reading by completing this task. Many simply fail it, never reading a single book all year. It's too hard for them. Others figure out how they can do the least reading possible while still meeting the requirements of the task. And all the while, *Shortland Street* continues to screen night after night, shaping the values of each new generation as it does so. You can't legislate transformation.

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I'd like to finish by quoting Pete, who's a member of the home group that studied Galatians last year. One night as we were discussing the law, I said how I'd never really understood passages in the Bible like Psalm 119, where the Psalmist keeps saying things like "How wonderful are thy precepts, O Lord", "O how I love your law", and "Your statutes are wonderful". Even spokespeople for Family First don't go round declaring "O how I love

Section 59 the way it used to be”. The law is, to us, quite prosaic, not something you tend to have a personal love for, even if it is good. As we discussed this, Pete suggested that perhaps what the Psalmist loves is the intention behind the law: the law is meant to bring us into intimacy with God. That was its purpose. It didn’t work. It wasn’t a bad law, but it didn’t succeed in doing what it was meant to do. Faith in Jesus Christ is the beginning of true intimacy with God, true transformation, and the restoration of the world to the way God meant it to be.

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