

## **Galatians 5 and 6 – being new-earthed**

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### **Freedom**

Having cleared the ground in chapters one to four, Paul, it seems to me, uses chapters five and six to say what he really wants to say. The letter is a bit like an America's Cup yacht which has to travel backwards and then turn around so as to cross the starting line at full tilt. Chapters one to four are like the boat doing all that faffing about behind the start line, and now, finally, in chapter five, Paul can start actually heading forwards. The chapter begins with a real hum-dinger of a statement: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." Good positive stuff. Slightly tautological, perhaps, but nonetheless, a hit, a palpable hit. This idea has already been foreshadowed in the previous chapters, in which he has set up a contrast between those who want to stick with the law, and are therefore enslaved, and those who have faith in Jesus, and are therefore free.

Freedom is such a common concept. We hear about it all the time. Each new President of America seems to acquire with the job a special relationship with the word 'freedom'. You almost wonder if America might take out a patent on the word one day. One of America's most potent symbols is, of course, the Statue of Liberty, the first landmark seen by many immigrants coming from Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as their ship headed towards Ellis Island. The statue was a gift to the United States from France, modelled on a much smaller version which exists in Paris. Of course, one of the great French catch-cries is "Liberty. Equality. Fraternity", made popular at the time of the French Revolution. It's interesting how two nations which have very self-consciously become republics, and so in a sense rule themselves, should have so enshrined the concept of liberty.

And yet freedom is such a slippery concept, and one that is best exemplified by those who *do* recognise a power and necessity greater than themselves. When I lived for the best part of a year at a school in northern France in the late 90s, I was accommodated in a room in a small apartment block on school grounds. The school bursar, a Monsieur Cochard, or some such, lived on the top floor. After my flatmates and I had a party downstairs one Saturday night, we each received the following Monday morning identical letters, no more than two lines in length, and signed by Monsieur Cochard, which read: “The freedom of the individual ends at precisely the point where another’s freedom begins.”

We worship a God who has accorded us freedom. It’s a freedom that we read about in the Garden of Eden narrative, in which Adam and Eve are instructed not to eat the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Yet when Adam and Eve choose to eat that fruit, God does not step in to stop them. They are free to disobey him. I’m not a parent, but I guess that much of the skill of it is learning to judge what degree of freedom is appropriate for your children at each new stage of life, and then leaving them to make their own mistakes. We have to curb our own freedom in order to allow others theirs. And it can be the hardest thing in the world to do. In Jesus, though, we have *the* classic example of one who curbs his own freedom in order to promote ours. In another Garden, the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays that heart-wrenching prayer – ‘Father, if you will, take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not my will, but yours be done.’ What did it take to pray that prayer? Moments later, Jesus is with Pontius Pilate and the Roman soldiers, being incited beyond what most human beings would be able to bear. Yet he holds his tongue, puts aside the power that he has earlier displayed in healing the masses, calming storms, and teaching, and endures the indignity.

Freedom, Paul argues in Galatians, is the consequence of placing your faith in Jesus Christ. As disciples, we are no longer slaves to the law, nor are we slaves to the sinful nature, but free.

I'd like you to notice one of the metaphors that Paul uses to describe this freedom in 5:7: "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?" If you have followed the career of the New Zealand middle-distance runner Nick Willis, you will be aware that his bronze-medal performance at last year's Beijing Olympics was not his first attempt at Olympic glory. Nick competed at the Athens Olympics in 2004. He was fancied to qualify for the 1500 metres final that year, only to be 'boxed in' in the semi-final, unable to break free from the runners surrounding him and make a sprint for the finishing line. This is the Galatians, hampered by the teachings of those who would have them be circumcised, cut off from the freedom that is theirs in Christ Jesus.

It is important to note that we are free, unlike France or America, not through insisting on our own right to rule ourselves, but through acknowledging the rule of Christ Jesus. His very title – Christ, or Lord – indicates his reign over us. But it's not a tyrannical rule. Rather, it is a liberating one, and one which produces the fruit listed in verse 22 of chapter five: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Isn't that a great list? That's a list worth coming back to.

I wonder too, if Paul wasn't deliberately echoing the Garden of Eden story here. By referring to these products of the Christ-centred life as 'fruit', does he perhaps set up an implicit contrast with the fruit which Adam and Eve ate? The fruit of the spirit promises life. It is a marker of "new creation", which we'll come to soon. Those who belong to Jesus are freed up for the enacting of God's will, freed up to be the people and to formulate the communities and environments that God had in mind in the first place. Imagine an orchard full of trees laden with the fruit of the spirit. Or a city of grand tree-lined boulevards, each tree sagging

with clusters of love and joy and peace and kindness. And self-control. This is freedom. As we sing sometimes, “Come die, come live – this is true freedom.”

## **Spirituality**

The second theme I’d like to pick up on is that of spirituality. Much of the letter up until chapter five, as we have seen, contrasts the life lived under the law with the life lived by faith in Christ. In chapter five, Paul amplifies this concept of the life lived by faith. Not only is it marked by faith in Jesus, it is also lived “by the Spirit”, (to use the phrase Paul uses in 5:16). It is this Spirit that produces the fruit discussed a moment ago. Paul then goes on, at the start of chapter six, to address “you who are spiritual”. It kind of makes you wonder if the Galatians had a Duke of Edinburgh scheme going, whereby you could earn yourself a spirituality badge after enough prayer, meditation and fasting. Maybe there was a spirituality Gold Award, and a Silver and a Bronze. Or perhaps not. But I’ve found myself intrigued by Paul’s direct address to “you who are spiritual”. This is because it seems to me that the concepts of ‘being spiritual’ and ‘spirituality’ have been somewhat hi-jacked since Paul wrote this letter. When I went to Unity Books the other day and asked if there was a religious section, I was directed to the area marked ‘Spirituality’. Spirituality can mean anything from New Age mysticism to high-rolling Pentecostalism through to people walking around prayer labyrinths or taking holidays to India.

When Paul addresses “you who are spiritual”, it’s not clear to me whether he has in mind some particular Galatian Christians – the really spiritual ones – or if he means the whole lot of them – on the basis that if you belong to Jesus, then by definition, you ought to be spiritual. I like to think the latter. I like to think that Paul sees the Galatians as being spiritual, since they have been bought by Christ. What if we too, as followers of Christ, are by definition spiritual. What might it mean?

I think perhaps it means being clearcut, bona-fide, easy to pick, will-stand-out-in-any-crowd, citizens of the new creation instituted by Jesus Christ. Paul uses this phrase “new creation” at the conclusion of his letter, when he writes: “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule...” In the same way, perhaps the outward markers of so-called spirituality – meditation, hands in the air, a charismatic demeanour – are not the real issue. The issue is down to earth markers of spirituality. If the spiritual among us are new creations who are citizens already of the new earth, then perhaps we could see ourselves as being new-earthed. New-rooted. New-grounded. We’ve been planted into the new ground of grace made available to us in Jesus Christ, and these are the conditions in which the fruit of the spirit can grow. Practices such as meditation, prayer and fasting are of course not irrelevant, but pathways towards this new-rooted-ness.

### **A plug for Paul**

The last thing I’d like to do before wrapping up is to give a plug for Paul. As I mentioned to you three weeks ago, our home group found him to be quite arrogant, opinionated and off-puttingly self-assured when we first came to *Galatians*. But as we wrestled together with this letter, and as I’ve gone about the task of preparing these sermons, I’ve found myself struck with admiration and even a sneaking affection for this man.

It’s become kind of cool to diss Paul, to shrink away from his self-assurance, to agree with those voices which claim he’s a misogynist and a bigot and intolerant and so on. But by contrast, I’ve come to see him as a genuinely great guy. Not only is he squarely on Jesus’ team – making futile any effort to divorce faith in Jesus from a healthy respect for Paul – but he is also in huge part responsible for our understanding of the significance of our Lord Jesus.

A few things that have struck me about him are these:

1. He *really* cares about the people he's writing to. Sure, he calls them "foolish Galatians", but repeatedly he addresses them as "brothers" (1:11; 3:15; 4:12; 4:28; 5:11; 5:13; 6:1). These foolish Galatians are like family members to Paul, and he sees it as vitally important that they take on board the teaching that he gave them. It freed *him*. He wants *them* to enjoy that same freedom. He envisages, I'd say, a world transformed by liberated followers of Jesus Christ. If the Galatians toss in their faith in favour of circumcision, that's the end of freedom, and it's curtains as far as God's new creation breaking into our present is concerned. This letter really doesn't read to me like the words of a man engaged on some personal power trip, but rather, the words of a man who cares about his readers.
2. Paul is gutsy. He is, perhaps, the proto-Aussie battler. He refers in this letter to being persecuted for preaching faith over circumcision. In 6:17, he speaks of bearing on his body the marks of Jesus. As one who loses sleep at the prospect of confrontation, I admire his willingness to face up to it. It'd be a rugged old world if it was full of Pauls, but we need at least some. And especially, we need people who are willing to take on the battles that really matter. Paul did this.
3. He seems to revel in hyperbole. We've already seen him wishing eternal condemnation upon his opponents in chapter one. In today's reading, he wishes emasculation upon them. This is fiery stuff. I don't think for a minute that he is wishing literal condemnation or emasculation upon anybody. But Paul knows an opponent when he sees one, and he's willing to do battle with them. Of the emasculation verse, Tom Wright says:

"If this language, and indeed the whole paragraph, seems to us quite violent and strident, that may perhaps be an indication that church people and theologians can easily become so affable, so friendly, so 'nice' to everybody that we fail to confront head-on false teachings that can do lasting

damage to churches and individual Christians. Anyone who has struggled for the life and soul of a Christian community against insidious opposition will know exactly what Paul was facing. And maybe the only way we can get our message through is by vivid language, multiple imagery, not just keeping people awake but shocking them into seeing what the real issues are.”<sup>1</sup>

We don't tend to write letters much any more. The advent of email has largely put paid to this quaint old practice. But I think we can be very grateful for the fact that Paul *did* bother to write this one to the Galatians. In it, he contends for the truth of the gospel, and paints a picture of what life lived in the light of that gospel should look like.

To me, Paul's letters are like those 'magic eye' books that were all the rage ten or twenty years ago, where the trick is to look *through* the pattern on the page and have your focal point somewhere *behind* it, until you can see the moving, shimmering pattern concealed beneath. Paul's letters require attention, perseverance, and application, but when given the time, they reward the reader with a vision of things that's different from the one preached by the circumcising party, the one preached by pluralists, and the ones preached by myriad other opponents to the gospel of Jesus Christ. For we are citizens of the New Earth, of the Kingdom of God, and we need constant reminding of the fact.

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, Tom. *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*. London: SPCK, 2002. Page 67.