

Paul and the Celts

Exploring Galatians

These studies are based on Paul's letter to the Galatians. Whereas in the gospels we are reading about Jesus who lived forty to sixty years earlier than when the gospels were written, in Galatians we come face to face directly with Paul writing just around twenty years after Jesus.

When he wrote Galatians, he did not see himself making a timeless literary contribution to the New Testament. On the contrary, he was responding to a real situation of his time happening among the Galatians which had caused him grief and anger. In the heat of his response, he sought to bring the Galatians back on track by focussing on what he saw as the heart of the Christian message. Forged in the fire of controversy his response earned a special place among the first century witnesses to faith and so in our New Testament.

Who were the Galatians? The Greek, *Galatai*, is a term meaning Celts. Celts were not just found in Ireland. They found their way to other parts of Europe including central Turkey around the city we now know as Ankara. The Romans called a province of Turkey after them, which included in addition peoples in large parts of southern Turkey who were not Celts. Some have wondered if Paul was writing to those groups where he founded churches early in his missionary endeavours. It would, however, have been very strange for Paul to address them as "Foolish Galatians". Most, therefore, conclude that Paul was writing to the ethnic Celts (Galatians) of the central region. In his second volume, Acts, Luke shows that he was aware of Paul's missionary work among them (16:6–8). Given its similarity to his letter to the Romans, most see Galatians as written shortly before, probably around 55 CE.

There are four sessions:

1. "I am astonished" Galatians 1:1–23; 2:1–10
2. "You foolish Galatians!" Galatians 2:11–21; 3:1–6 (7–26) 27–29
3. "For freedom Christ has set us free" Galatians (4:1–31) 5:1–26
4. "Bear one another's burdens" Galatians 6:1–18

Each study asks you to read a passage from Galatians, offers you a commentary which brings today's thinking into dialogue with the text, and includes some open-ended questions for you to use as springboards for your own discussion and action. The questions are deliberately very open, so you can have space to bring your own experience and questions to the text and take it where you need to go, which may differ from group to group. I encourage you to read also the passages in brackets, so that you will have read all of Galatians. I comment on it all, but if you need to limit the length of the readings in a group setting, you can leave out the bracketed sections.

If you are coming together as a group, make sure

- everyone can see everyone else
- everyone is included and is encouraged to participate as they would like
- there is room for people to agree, differ, be clear or confused, and be accepted
- people are encouraged to value each other's input, to listen without using that time to work out what you are going to say and without interrupting, and, when discussing a question, to keep the focus on the question

You will need at least one Bible translation. NRSV is probably best, but others might include NIV or some other new translation. The sessions are designed to last around 60 minutes and encourage you to explore not only what the texts meant on the basis of the latest historical research but also what they might mean for living today.

Making these studies work for you and your group.

Adapt them to suit your group and its preferences. For instance, you can read the passage and the commentary and then look at the questions. Or you could first read the passage and note anything which popped out for you and then read the commentary, section by section, stopping to talk about anything that arises, before going right through to the end and looking at the questions. Or you could start with a general question on the topic before doing one of the above. Or you may want to circulate the studies in advance, so that people have already read the passage and commentary before they come. Then go through it when you come together in one of the ways mentioned above. ... whatever makes the studies work best for you!

For further information on the Revised Common Lectionary see weekly commentaries:

<https://billloader.com/lectionaryindex.html>

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Session One

“I am astonished” Galatians 1:1–23; 2:1–10

People like Paul who learned to read and write, knew the conventions about writing letters. For us they are minimal: we begin traditionally with “Dear ...” and end with “Your sincerely” or “Yours faithfully”. In Paul’s world there was much more to it. You began with a greeting. “X to Y, hi!”, “William of Orange NSW to participants in these studies, grace and peace”, usually expanded with comments or images related to what would be the theme of the letter. “William of Orange NSW, writer of these and other studies to participants in these studies, young and old, slim and not slim, grace and peace from God who made us to feel, think and explore”. The greeting was followed by comments wishing the recipients well, praising or giving thanks for them, and indicating your desire to see them. The letter usually concluded with the passing on of greetings from others.

Paul follows this standard procedure in all his letters except this one. He leaves out the traditional section of courteous well-wishing comments, and instead comes straight to the point: “I am astonished” and goes on to express his disappointment. Similarly, at the end of the letter, he drops the usual passing on of greetings. Paul is very angry. Why?

Christian preachers had entered Galatia where he had founded churches and were telling them that Paul’s gospel was inadequate. Amongst other things, they were telling them that they needed to be circumcised and to follow the other commandments of the Law found in the Scriptures. Paul has not only heard of their efforts but also that they had been successful. How dare they!?

Who were they? Later he talks about the “circumcision faction” among early Christians (2:12). We would call them fundamentalists. It is not too hard to imagine their message: “The Bible says Gentiles [non-Jews] must be circumcised. Paul has watered down the commands of Scripture in order to make his gospel more acceptable. Paul’s gospel is false.”

They were correct that the Scriptures required that Gentiles be circumcised. It is clearly stated in Genesis 17. Paul and others, like Peter and James, Jesus’ brother, had come to the conclusion, however, that they would not demand that Gentiles be circumcised. Love and inclusiveness, also a biblical value, convinced them to override the circumcision demand. They had learned this way of approaching Scripture and its commands from Jesus. People mattered most. As Jesus is reported as saying: “The sabbath was made for people not people for the sabbath” (Mark 2:27).

Paul is angry. He will have none of it. He may even go a little too far, declaring that such preachers are accursed. Later he quips: they should go and mutilate themselves (5:12)! He is aware of the charge that he had watered down the gospel to seek people’s approval. That is why he goes on to challenge it in 1:10.

There is clearly another problem. These preachers had obviously also been saying that Paul was not a true apostle. He was not authorised. He was not like Peter (Aramaic: Cephas) or James, Jesus’ brother, who by this time was running the church in Jerusalem. This challenge to his authority explains why from the very start in his initial greeting Paul describes himself as “sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father” (1:1).

“Apostle” comes from a Greek word which simply means: “envoy” or “sent one”. The discrediting of his apostleship and not just his gospel also annoyed Paul. So in 1:11–17 he backs up his claim to have been sent and authorised by Jesus, not by Peter or James. Earlier, he had become well known to followers of Jesus as a strong opponent of the movement who hunted them down. He would probably have had a very good grasp of the gospel they preached while he was doing so. He didn’t need instruction from Peter and James.

Perhaps his intensity in trying to stamp the movement out was heightened by feeling conflicted about it, part of him suspecting they were right. Sometimes people’s inner conflicts energise their extreme reactions and they can then suddenly flip. Paul suddenly flipped on his way to hunt down Christ followers in Damascus. Confronted by a vision of Jesus he became convinced that God had chosen him to be Jesus’ agent to spread the gospel to Gentiles.

This was an exceptional event. No time for training or ministerial formation. He had done his theology from the lips of those he had struck down. Off he went, he tells us, to spread the message of Jesus in areas east of Syria, the land of the Nabateans, then sometimes called Arabia, but not the land of Saudi Arabia we know today.

Three years later he finally went up to Jerusalem and spent a fortnight with Cephas (Peter) and also saw James (1:18), but that was it. Paul wasn’t about to tuck himself into a hierarchy where he would have to be accountable to them. He was accountable to God. Then off he went, this time as far as the lower regions of Asia Minor (Turkey). Why does he have to insist in 1:21 that he is not lying? Almost certainly because his opponents are saying something different: perhaps that he agreed to submit to the senior apostles and then didn’t.



The issue of his apostleship continues into chapter 2. Fourteen years later he returned to Jerusalem (2:1), probably the same occasion as Acts 15 describes, where the apostles finally resolved not to demand circumcision of Gentiles. Here we meet the circumcision party, the fundamentalists, again. We also see Paul’s stance towards the so-called pillars, Peter and James and John: “those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)” (2:6). They accepted his status and his role as apostle to the Gentiles, just as they accepted that Peter was apostle to the Jews. It went well. Paul must have been relieved.

In his commissioning there is an additional note of importance: “They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do” (2:10). “The poor” here are not the poor generally but the poor among the Jesus followers in Jerusalem, who, wisely or otherwise, had sold up their possessions and became dependent on handouts. Paul took this task seriously, making collections across his mission areas as you can see in 1 Cor 16:1–4; 2 Corinthians 8:1–8; 9:1–9; and Romans 15:25–29. He used the words *diakonia* (“ministry”) and *koinonia* (“fellowship/communion/sharing”) to describe the endeavour. Collecting money for those in need was about love and solidarity – and still is.

So far, all was well. Paul has made his case. He had grasped what the gospel of radical love proclaimed by Jesus meant, even before he embraced it. He had gained recognition for the fact that this was the basis of his authority. He was one with all who bore this good news to the world.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why did some followers of Jesus oppose Paul?
3. In what ways do you see similar issues troubling the church today and how can we best deal with them?

Session Two

“You foolish Galatians!” Galatians 2:11–21; 3:1–29

There is rather a lot to read of Galatians for this session. If you need to abbreviate, I suggest you read at least 2:11–21 and 3:1–6 and 3:27–29. I also summarise the gist of 3:7–26 below.

By the time you reach Gal 2:10, it seems that Paul has made his point, but then comes something more. Those who have been undermining his influence in Galatia must have been appealing to Peter (Cephas) for their authority. Paul’s problem is clearly a lot more complicated. He is offside with Peter, not to speak of James, Jesus’ brother. No wonder his critics disapproved of his gospel.

What is Paul’s defence? First, he recounts an occasion in Antioch in Syria, and then goes on to support his stance with arguments. In this session we trace his moves, beginning with 2:11–14.

In Antioch, those who had joined the Jesus movement included both Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews). Meeting together was a core aspect of being part of the movement and that usually included sharing a meal and, we may assume, sharing what we now call Holy Communion. Peter (Cephas), Paul and Barnabas were all part of those fellowship meals. Then some people came from James, Jesus’ brother in Jerusalem, on his authority we assume. They express disapproval. Why?



Normally, Jews should not enter Gentiles houses or eat with them, at least not on a regular basis. The group in Antioch may have been meeting in a Gentile home, but equally problematic: they were mixing regularly. Such separation rested on instructions that one should not walk in the way of the ungodly (= Gentiles) (e.g., Psalm 1:1–2). Some contact was inevitable, but there were provisions for ritual purification. The problem was that regular contact should be avoided where possible and that was not happening.

We see these assumptions at work in the stories about Jesus’ healing Gentiles. In the case of his healing of both the Syrophenician woman’s daughter (Mark 7:24–30) and the centurion’s servant (Matt 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–11), Jesus did not enter their homes but healed them from a distance. It is noteworthy that only with Gentiles do we find such distancing. We see the same assumption operating when, according to Acts 10, Peter was reluctant to enter the house of the centurion, Cornelius. He then has a vision which suggests he give up the distinction between clean and unclean animals, but really it is about not seeing people as unclean. Peter, then, gets the message and goes to Cornelius’ home.

There is a major clash of values here. Do you follow the rules of your religion, based on your Bible, or do you adapt to new situations on the basis of the deeper values which run through Scripture. The people from James apparently insisted either that the believing Jews withdraw or that the Gentiles convert to Judaism, that is, commit themselves if not to being circumcised then at least to following biblical laws about foods and other practices. Caught in between, Peter goes along with James’

people and stops his practice of eating regularly with Gentile believers and so does Barnabas, Paul's mission partner.

Paul was furious and accuses Peter of hypocrisy. Why? Because Peter had been happy to mix and now was not. He was not acting consistently with the gospel he preached. What did Paul mean? In what follows I summarise Paul's argument. In the way that he puts his argument we can also trace what his opponents were saying.

He starts in 2:15 with an assumption – we might even say prejudice – which his opponents would share: they, Jews by birth, were not like Gentiles who are sinners. He then turns to the heart of the gospel: all people are set right with God by believing in Jesus. That means *all* people, not just Gentiles. All are sinners. Seeing fellow Jews as sinners is not to deny one's faith nor to betray one's heritage – as some would have accused him of doing. On the contrary, to claim that Jews are not sinners would be to betray the gospel.

Paul then goes on to speak of himself (2:19–21). He no longer sees himself as right with God by being a Jew, even a Law observing Jew as he used to be. He sees himself as right with God because of the gift Christ brought and offered to all. His old sinner self has died, as he put it. He now has a new life. Elsewhere he talks about baptism as like the experience of dying, being buried and coming back to life.

Underlying all that Paul is saying is his belief in God's grace, God's generosity, which offers a relationship, a partnership, of life to all; not only to Jews but also to Gentiles. Paul sees this especially brought to focus in Christ's death, which summed up his message of God's love and generosity.

“Foolish”, “bewitched” Galatians (3:1)? Why? Because there were Christian preachers saying that believing in and accepting God's generous offer of a restored relationship was not enough. They also needed to be circumcised and to keep a hundred different biblical rules. In response, Paul appeals to the days when they were converted by him. Did they really not remember the sense of oneness they felt, the impact of God's Spirit? It was not because they kept lots of commandments. It was simply God's offer of grace.

Paul then adds some additional arguments in 3:6–9. He cites Genesis 15:6, where Abraham was declared to be in a right relationship with God (justified). On what basis? Not because of keeping rules, but because he believed and trusted who God is long before there was the biblical law. Paul cites the promise to Abraham in Genesis: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). A little later, when writing to the Romans, he expands on this to declare that Gentiles, too, are children of Abraham, in the sense they, too, can be set right with God by believing in what God offers (Rom 4:11–12).

Paul is trying to persuade the Galatians not to see keeping the commandments and being circumcised as the way to get right with God. If that were the case, no one would succeed. All would be cursed and he is really saying: no one has succeeded. In 3:10–14 he uses the motif of being cursed to make a connection with Christ's death. Death by crucifixion was terrible and it was common to see crucified people as cursed. It is a daring metaphor, for he goes on to say: Christ suffered that curse on our behalf. So, if they understand that, no one else needs to suffer it. All, now, Jews and Gentiles, have access to God's goodness and generosity.

Next, in 3:15–18, he makes the point that God’s promise to Abraham, and through Abraham to all peoples, still stands. It was valid long before Moses received the Law on Sinai. The blessing promised to Gentiles, that they, too, can be restored into a right relationship with God, does not depend on keeping the Law and its commandments. It depends entirely on God’s generosity.

Making the Law not so important would have greatly appalled his critics and worried their followers. Was the Law, especially as it is presented in the first five books of the Bible, not the infallible Word of God? Paul must explain. In 3:19–24, he does just that. The Law had its role, he argued, in making people realise their sinfulness and so helping them see that nothing they could do would set them right with God. That had to be God’s initiative and it was – through Christ. Paul mentions that the Law was given via angels, a view widely held and usually as a way of underlining its authority. That is how it is meant in Hebrews 2:3–4. Paul turns it the other way round to imply that this indicated that it had a subordinate role. It was like the household slave responsible for children’s education and discipline until they grew up.

Paul was saying: the Law is from God and is good, answering his critics who might have thought the opposite. Its role, however, he argued, was limited and mainly negative. “Now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian” (3:25). We are now grownup children. We now have a different relationship with God, based solely on God’s generosity and love.

Our section ends with a famous passage reflecting on baptism (3:27–29). Paul sees baptism as like clothing oneself with Christ. That is a mixed image – getting our clothes wet!? Being clothed with something was an image for being incorporated into or embraced by something bigger than yourself. In this case it is Christ or the Spirit of Christ. Baptism celebrates our becoming part of the body of Christ’s influence, becoming part of Christ’s body. They were mainly baptising adults or whole households. We are often baptising infants, but always to celebrate their belonging. Later they can confirm that decision and celebrate that they have been beneficiaries of being in such a sphere of influence, the body of Christ, or walk away from it.

The famous words are words of inclusion: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (3:28). Paul’s main point is that the Galatians, who are Gentiles, commonly called “Greeks”, can believe that this is true, therefore, of themselves. They have received the blessing of Abraham, so they should not listen to those preachers who want to add extra demands.

We often value these words for their inclusiveness in relation to the other elements which Paul mentions, perhaps because he was citing a traditional statement. Whether you are a free citizen, a freed slave, or a slave, you matter. Similarly, whether you are male or female, you matter, equally. It would take centuries to work through the implications of these radical thoughts, especially to the point of abolishing slavery and really treating women and men as equals, alas, an ongoing challenge. God’s generosity, God’s grace, is the basis for having a right relationship with God, whoever we are.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why was Paul offside with Peter?
3. How do you see the struggle against prejudice and discrimination today? What is your experience and what can we do about it?

“For freedom Christ has set us free” Galatians (4:1–31) 5:1–26

In this session we turn our attention primarily to Galatians 5 after a brief summary of Galatians 4.

In Galatians 4 Paul returns to challenge the Galatians not to return to slavery. He is referring to their former lives as pagans, subject to belief in gods who were no gods. He also equates taking on the demands of the preachers who want them to keep biblical laws with slavery. Going along with them would, Paul argues, put them back to where they started. He scolds them: “You are observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years” (4:10). These will be Jewish festivals and sacred days. He then adds: “I am afraid that my work for you may have been wasted” (4:11).

It becomes quite personal. Paul mentions that they helped him when he was unwell, possibly a problem with his sight, and then complains: “Have I now become your enemy by telling you the truth?” (4:16). “I am perplexed about you” (4:20). The chapter ends with an allegory in which he contrasts Abraham’s two sons: Isaac, his son through Sarah, and Ishmael, his son through his slave, Hagar, whom he then expels along with his mother. Paul uses it to say that the Galatians are children of Abraham and Isaac, not children of the slave. The allegory seems rather bizarre: “Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children” (4:25). Like many such images it leaves a lot to be desired. Paul is saying: don’t listen to those preachers! To call Gentile Galatians children of Abraham and like Isaac and to call his critics among his fellow Jewish Christians, slaves and children of Hagar and like Ishmael, was to turn traditional values upside down and would have made them furious.

In Galatians 5 Paul takes us back to the problem, urging the Galatians not to follow those fundamentalist preachers, which would in effect be to abandon Christ and turn their back on God’s grace. Very angry, Paul declares: “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves!” (5:12). If that is not Paul at his best, what follows is some of his finest writing.

Paul tells them that they are called to freedom. He explains that this is not freedom to do whatever they like. He needed to say this, because it could easily sound like that. If you don’t live by the Law, aren’t you lawless? Paul does not mean freedom without a rudder. He means freedom to let the Spirit flow into us and through us. That is ultimately also the aim of the Law, as Paul puts it: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’” (5:14), citing Leviticus 19:18.



He contrasts the flesh and the Spirit in 5:16–25. By the flesh he means not our physical self, but a lifestyle focused on meeting our own desires and not caring about others let alone God. It is characterised by the behaviours he lists: “sexual wrongdoing, (moral) impurity, licentiousness, ²⁰idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, ²¹envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (5:19–21). These are clearly much more than physical,

of the “flesh” in the literal sense, and are not necessarily physical at all. They are matters of behaviour and of the mind and attitude.

“By contrast,” he writes, “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³gentleness, and self-control” (5:22–23). These, too, have to do with behaviour, mind and attitude. Already John the Baptist and Jesus had used the common image of a healthy tree bearing healthy fruit and a sick tree producing bad fruit (Matt 3:10; 7:17–20). The key insight here is that attitudes and behaviours arise from who we are. They may be sometimes guided by rules and principles, but basically, they come about from within. Right attitude produces right behaviour.



Being loved produces the peace and sense of well-being that means I no longer need to compete with others and be anxious about my identity. I have space, free from such fear and guilt, to love others. Love creates such space. That is the gospel as Paul understands it. Goodness is the result not primarily of putting in effort to keep the commandments but opening oneself to be loved. Love produces love. As Paul would later put it in his letter to the Romans, such living more than fulfils what the Law demands (Rom 8:3–4).

Paul is defending his gospel against the charge that it sets the Law aside and so sets good behaviour aside. Quite the contrary, his gospel assumes that love is the key. It deals with guilt through forgiveness and deals with fear through reassurance, and so frees people’s energy from being expended on themselves, and thus able to be redirected towards others. We see this in life, where giving people, whether children or adults, the security of love and acceptance sets them free to change much more effectively than loading them up with commandments.

Paul’s opponents could, of course, point to some of the misbehaviour which occurred in Paul’s churches in Corinth. Was that not the result of his preaching? His letters to the Corinthians show that Paul’s answer was not to turn away from love but rather to make it the absolute centre of faith. “Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). What Paul had to do was point out the implications of putting love at the centre. In most of his letters he has a concluding section which seeks to spell out what love looks like. It is less like reinventing new commandments or reinstating old ones and more like directing the stream, so that love flows in the right channels.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. Why did Paul say that setting the Law aside could have good outcomes?
3. What produces good behaviour? What is the role of commandments? What produces good fruit? What is your experience and observation of life?

“Bear one another’s burdens” Galatians 6:1–18

Practicalities end Paul’s letter. They include matters of discipline. Don’t sweep wrongdoing under the carpet. But also, don’t destroy people by being judgemental. “Restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness” (6:1) – still makes very good sense.

Bearing one another’s burdens could mean many things. In their world, where people lived close to poverty if not in it, bearing one another’s burdens had to mean helping one another out, especially those facing poverty and hardship. Being good news for the poor was and remains at the heart of the gospel. It is, therefore, as Paul puts it, to fulfil the Law of Christ. It is interesting that the word “Law” appears here. It is not an appeal to the biblical Law which had created problems among the Galatians, but to Christ’s Law or probably better, how Jesus interpreted the biblical Law – namely from its heart: love.

Who do you think you are? Paul knows that it is always a problem when “ego” gets in the road of being community and some people want to dominate or be the centre of attention or compete for it (6:3). The more you become convinced of God’s love and learn to love yourself, the less you will feel the need to be self-serving. Paul had spoken of the fruit of the Spirit as love – for others, for oneself, for God. He also knows that people need stimulus and encouragement to let it happen. “All must carry their own loads” (6:5) seems to be the opposite of bearing one another’s burdens, but its focus is different. It amounts to saying: take responsibility for yourself.

“Those who are taught the word must share in all good things with their teacher” (6:6) reflects the general rule which applied in the Jesus movement from the beginning. Disciples sent out on mission should be given hospitality and cared for. They should not have to work to earn money to maintain themselves. Paul is telling the Galatians: look after your leaders. Ministers’ “stipends” were originally based on this rule: giving them just enough to survive and continue their work, not rewarding them with a wage based on their achievements and status. The norm is that all receive the same stipend, however long they have served.

Paul never treated that rule as unbreakable. He decided from time to time to earn his own keep and so relieve others of the burden of supporting him. The fundamentalist believers saw this as a sign of his lack of faith and obedience to Jesus’ instructions, which their inflexibility treated as hard and fast rules. You can read his defence in 1 Corinthians 9:1–23. Paul couldn’t win. When he worked as a tent maker to support himself, they attacked him for lack of faith. When he made a collection of money to help out the poor believers in Judea, they suggested he was on the make for himself (2 Cor 12:13–18)!

Paul uses the image of harvesting to encourage the Galatians to be generous in their support for one another (6:7–10). Love and generosity not only does good; it also brings its own reward. When Paul speaks of sowing to the flesh, he means acting only in your own self-interest. To sow to the Spirit is to open one’s mind to the Spirit and let the fruit of love and generosity be the result.

It appears that Paul followed the common practice of dictating his letters while someone else wrote them down. He might then add something in his own handwriting at the end. This appears to be the

case also with Galatians (6:11). Why does he refer to his writing in large letters? Perhaps because he had eyesight difficulties. These may have been acute when he was with the Galatians and be the reason he mentioned appreciating their help (4:13–14).

Paul, in his own hand, comes back to his main concern: the pressure on the Galatians from certain preachers to get circumcised (6:12-13). Paul suggests that they are pushing the Galatians in that direction to avoid being criticised by fellow Jews and fellow Jewish Christians for abandoning their Jewish faith of which they were proud. Paul sees this as a distraction from real faith and worse: self-indulgence on their part.

His comments are striking: “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (6:14). It too easily sounds to our ears just like another statement of faith, but in their world, it was very confronting and challenging. Crucifixion was a means of shaming people and scaring people. It was one of the worst humiliations imaginable. Paul turns such realities on their head. He sees in that awful humiliation a revelation of God’s love. The lowest point imaginable becomes the highest point imaginable. His boast, or better, his confidence rests not on how impressive he can make himself to the world and to himself and to others, but on being loved by God.



In the light of such radical rethinking, matters like whether one is circumcised or not, pale into insignificance. What matters is “a new creation”. To the Corinthians he wrote: “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor 5:17). Paul refuses to surrender to the kind of fundamentalism which defines faith by fixed rules and observances. God is so much bigger than that.

Peace is not just a way of saying “Hello”, as indeed it was. It is also a word meaning health, wholeness, salvation. Paul wishes it on the Galatians and also on “the Israel of God”. Perhaps he uses that term to refer to his own Jewish people; perhaps he uses it to refer to all who embrace the gospel which it generated.

His last words are an enigma. What does he mean when he writes: “From now on, let no one make trouble for me; for I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body” (6:17). Probably he is referring to scars from beatings he would, on occasion, have received at the hands of synagogue leaders. Some have speculated that perhaps he carried what is called the stigmata, namely marks on his hands and feet, as Jesus would have had from crucifixion – a fantasy of later times.

For Reflection and Sharing

1. What insights or ideas in the passage and its commentary do you find particularly interesting, puzzling or challenging?
2. What did Paul mean by “bearing one another’s burdens”?
3. “A new creation is everything!” (6:15). How relevant are Paul’s observations for Christian community today and what would you want to add?