

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, July 10, 2016**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**Galatians 3:23-29**  
**“Letters to the churches – Galatians”**

Continuing this summer series of high-level looks at the letters to the churches that we find in the New Testament, today: Paul's letter to the Galatians. Or more specifically, as he puts it in Galatians 1:2: *To the churches in Galatia*. There are couple of things in that phrase that we would do well to keep in mind as we look at the letter as a whole.

Firstly, it is not a letter to specific individuals. In fact, there is very little mention of individuals that we find in other New Testament letters. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul mentions by name Sosthenes, Chloe, Apollos, Cephas, Crispus, Gaius, Stephanas, Barnabas, Timothy, Fortunatus, Achaicus, Aquila and Prisca, several of them more than once. Admittedly, 1 Corinthians is a longer letter than the letter to the Galatians, but still Galatians lacks that personal feel that some of the other letters has. In Galatians Paul mentions only Cephas, Barnabas, Titus, James, and John, and most of them he mentions only in the context of arguing with them. And there are no personal greetings in Galatians, other than 6:11, where Paul says *See what large letters I make when I am writing in my own hand!*

The practice of the time was that Paul would have dictated his letters to a scribe, his corresponding secretary, if you will, and added only his signature to the end. Here, however, he seems to have taken the personal step of writing something in his own handwriting, and in large letters, either for emphasis, or as some scholars have wondered, because he was short-sighted.

And the second point to take from the phrase *To the churches in Galatia* is that the letter was not addressed to a single Christian community. Scholars generally agree that it was intended to be more of a general letter, to be circulated round several Christian communities in the region known as Galatia. The Galatia that this refers to is the Roman province that took up much of what we now know as central Turkey. The capital of Galatia was Ancyra, the ancient name of Ankara, the present capital city of Turkey. Paul had visited the area on two of his missionary journeys. Acts 16:6 talks about Paul and Silas, possibly accompanied by Timothy, going through the region. Churches and Christian communities had been established in several places, either directly by Paul himself or growing out of churches he established by his preaching. It was to them that Paul wrote his letter.

Many of the people who made up the churches in Galatia were Gentiles, converts from outside the Jewish faith. Paul tells them that *when you did not know God, you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods* Galatians 4:8. As a convert from the Jewish faith himself, he would never have talked about converted Jews in those terms.

But much of his reason for writing was to address questions about how Gentiles in particular who wished to join the Christian community as followers of Jesus had to go about it. Could they come from their former pagan faith directly into the Christian faith, or must they first become Jews, with all that that meant in terms of circumcision, Sabbath observance, and the covenant with Moses? Was that an essential part of the process of joining the Christian community? It was one of the major points that had to get sorted out as the Christian church went through the process of separating from the Jewish faith. For Paul, it all came down to the tension between the freedom that the gospel of Jesus Christ brings, and the requirements of the law of Moses.

He opens the letter with an extended salutation, rather longer than he does in some other letters, that hints at what is to follow: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen.* Galatians 1:3-5.

And then without further ado, he launches right into his reason for writing to them. He is astonished that they were turning to a different gospel, a gospel contrary to what he had proclaimed to them — *not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ* Galatians 1:6-8.

Those who were, in Paul's words, perverting the gospel of Jesus Christ were urging the Gentile Christians to be circumcised – Galatians 6:12. They had succeeded in persuading the Gentile Christians to observe the special days, months, seasons, and years of the Jewish calendar – Galatians 4:10. What it amounted to was that they were requiring Gentiles first to become full converts to the Jewish faith as part of their journey on to commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul talks about all of this as the Galatian Christians sliding back into what he calls the kind of slavery that they had experienced as Gentiles before their conversion to the gospel – *you were enslaved to beings that by nature are not gods. Now, however, 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?* Galatians 4:8-9. No, says Paul, in the glorious words of 5:1: *for freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. Instead, live by the Spirit ... (because) if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law* Galatians 5:16,18.

Not that the freedom for which Christ has set us free is to be used an opportunity for self-indulgence, says Paul, *but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. And they should be very clear about one thing: the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* Galatians 5:13-14, 22-23.

Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Generosity. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-Control. These are the fruit of the Spirit, says Paul, and by extension these are the marks of the follower of Jesus Christ. And the expectation to see such qualities are the only requirement to be placed on followers of Jesus as they live by the Spirit.

I chose the texts for this summer series several weeks ago, before I left for Scotland. There is a terrible irony that we should read about being one in Christ Jesus today, when it is all too clear that the world is not united. Violence, protests and shootings in the USA, political chaos in the UK, Canadian troops and fighter jets being sent to Eastern Europe, bombings in Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. Are we being naïve? Are we fooling ourselves, simply whistling in the wind?

I don't believe we are. In fact I believe the world may need to hear the gospel message today more than it has ever done. If only for the sake of Ella (NOTE: we celebrated Ella's baptism this morning) and all the children of the world, we must rededicate ourselves to the cause of unity and peace through faith in Jesus Christ. I am reminded of the words of G K Chesterton in *What's Wrong With The World*: "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried."

*... 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.* Galatians 3:28.