

**A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church**  
**By Chris Fillingham**  
**“A Community of Belonging”**  
**4<sup>th</sup> in the series *Becoming the Church***  
**Galatians 2 and 3**  
**May 21, 2017**

I'm going to read from the letter of Galatians in just a moment. But before I do, I want to set up the story here. I think that's important because the letters in the New Testament have often been misread.

They've been read like theological encyclopedias, or ethics textbooks, or the 10 commandments that come down from the mountain of God, rather than letters... letters that are part of an ongoing conversation. When you read them as letters, you remember that these are snapshots of an unfolding story.

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For the last several weeks, we've been in this series on, “Becoming the Church” where we're following the story of the community of the Resurrected One becoming the church, and we've been following that story in the Book of Acts.

Today we're not leaving that story as we move into this letter to the Galatians, but we're reading that very same story now from a different angle. We're reading that story by picking up one letter that was written by one of the characters in Acts, to one of the churches in Acts.

It's written by Paul to the church in Galatia.

It's a letter that comes out of a story... as all letters do.

And the story here is another chapter in the controversy we've been following here the last several weeks... a controversy around what it means to belong to the household of God...

A controversy about who is in and who is out,  
about what is required and what isn't.

It first got started when Philip baptized an Ethiopian eunuch, but really broke loose when Peter baptized the Roman gentile, Cornelius.

As we heard last week, they had to have a big meeting in Jerusalem to discern what God was up to. After wrestling with the tradition and the Scriptures, and wrestling with their experience of encountering God in these gentiles...

a decision was made... a decision that changes the very DNA of the community.

***The only thing required to become part of the church was commitment to Christ, period.***

***You didn't have to change your identity. And I really hope you hear that. You did not have to change your identity. That's what circumcision was all about. It was the way a gentile could become a Jew.***

***Commitment to Christ would become the only requirement.***

This is where this community of the Resurrected One...begins to break out of its Jewish home, its Jewish origins...

and become something new, a different kind of community...

a community we now call the church.

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But it's not a simple transition. They still have to learn how to live in this transition...this new reality of becoming the church. And that is where this letter from Paul to the Galatians comes in.

In what I'm about to read, Paul is talking about something that happened as this transition unfolds.

You see Peter, who was one of the first people to baptize a Gentile, he tried to live out their decision by doing something more than just letting gentiles in... He took things another step when he was over at the church in Antioch.

He broke with other parts of their custom by eating meals with gentiles. That doesn't sound like a big deal to us... but remember, part of their religious identity was rooted in table practices: who you ate with and who you didn't eat with; what you ate and what you didn't eat.

So you can imagine that during this transition, church potlucks were kind of... well, they were complicated.

Just picture it: One of the gentiles brings a big ham in for Easter lunch and plops it right down in the middle of all the kosher foods... and everyone gasps. They are horrified. Ham from a pig?

The gentiles don't understand why nobody is getting in line, so they go first, filling their plate with a little of this and a little of that... cross contaminating a bit of everything.

I mean, it would be like putting a big old basket of rolls and a few cakes right in the middle of a gluten free feast for a bunch of people with celiac. Just seeing all that gluten sitting there is enough to make their stomachs churn.

Peter sees what's happening and he tries to be brave. He takes the step of filling his plate. And not only that, he even sits at the table with all that un-kosher meat... and un-kosher people. He eats with them.

It's a huge statement... and a controversial one. But Peter had seen Jesus break the rules when it comes to whom you eat with and whom you don't... so he assumed it was the right thing to do.

Well... you know what happens when we assume...

Later some more traditional folks come down from Jerusalem, and they have a conniption fit. **"It's one thing to baptize them,"** they say to Peter. **"It's another thing to act like they are just like us. You can't just abandon all our sacred traditions. I mean, if you do... what are we left with?"**

So Peter, being his bold and fickle self... well, he caved. It's not like he wanted to eat with those new folks anyway. It was a bit awkward. He'd much rather sit with his friends. And then he didn't have to smell all that gross un-kosher meat they were eating.

So under fire, he stopped eating with them. And wouldn't you know it... other folks followed.

Before too long, it's obvious what is happening. There's a two-tiered system in the church... two classes of people:

The real Christians, the pure, A+ followers of the faith and tradition and scripture  
... and everyone else who they tolerated.

Those who have the right identity (that is, they were born Jewish or were circumcised to become Jewish),  
...and those who have the wrong identity.

Paul gets news of this... and it breaks his heart... Or more accurately, it made his blood boil. Paul knew what was at stake here. The very foundation of the Gospel.

And so, he goes to Antioch and takes Peter to task right in front of everyone.  
Here's what Paul writes to the Galatians about that incident over in Antioch. This is chapter 2:11-14

(11-13) Later, when Peter came to Antioch, I had a face-to-face confrontation with him because he was clearly out of line. Here's the situation. Earlier, before certain persons had come from James, Peter regularly ate with the non-Jews. But when that conservative group came from Jerusalem, he cautiously pulled back and put as much distance as he could manage between himself and his non-Jewish friends. That's how fearful he was of the conservative Jewish clique that had been pushing the old system of circumcision. Unfortunately, the rest of the Jews in the Antioch church joined in that hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas [my good friend] was swept along in the charade.

<sup>14</sup> But when I saw that they were not maintaining a steady, straight course according to the [gospel,] I spoke up to Peter in front of them all: "If you, a Jew, live like a non-Jew when you're not being observed by the watchdogs from Jerusalem, what right do you have to require non-Jews to conform to Jewish customs just to make a favorable impression on your old Jerusalem cronies?"

Paul calls Peter to the carpet... And not just Peter, but all the others with them. Because this issue is so central to the gospel...

Because at the heart of the gospel is a new reality where there are no second-class citizens. There are no stepchildren in the household of God.

And any practice, any habit, any tradition that suggests otherwise, has to be called out and changed. That's what Paul is doing.

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You see this controversy *is about much more than circumcision*.  
It's about what it means to become the church with people of various identities.

In fact, as the letter to the Galatians goes on, he says as much. This is about way more than just Jew and Gentile... it is about every kind of identity that divides us, that would create a class system in the church.

In 3:28 Paul writes that in Christ, there is no longer Jew or gentile... but not just that... there is no longer slave or free, male or female. We are all one in Christ.

***And that was a radical new idea!***

They lived in a world where it was just normal for the head of the household to have his wife and then his children, but also his servants and then his slaves... and I use the possessive on purpose here.

I mean, try to picture this.

In a society where slaves and masters were a normal thing, where it was just part of the economy of the day...

If you were a slave, that was your station in life. It was intrinsic to who you were. It defined your worth, your standing, your way of life, your relationships. They could not see the world otherwise. It was just normal.

There were masters and then there were slaves.

But here comes Paul saying that Christ breaks down those barriers. So as they gather together as the church, the slave and the master will sit side by side as brothers... because we are one in Christ?

In a society where women were seen as inferior,  
where they could not testify in court because a woman's word had no value,  
in a society where female babies were more likely to be discarded because they weren't as valuable as male babies,  
where men didn't hesitate to divorce their wives if they got bored with them, and they certainly didn't refrain from promiscuous behavior, because their wives were their property...

In this world, Paul says that in Christ there is no division between men and women.

In other words, the trajectory of this controversy between Jew and Gentiles... is expanding more and more.

It started with Jew and Gentile, but as this community grows into the gospel, as it becomes the church, the gospel vision becomes about **all the various identities that divide us**, all the identities that create categories of the pure and the impure people, that create first-class and second-class citizens.

As the community becomes the church, all these identities get left at the door, because the gospel is doing something explosive and expansive, breaking down the barriers,  
breaking down the dividing walls of our many different identities.

**"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."** Paul writes.

***This is a radical new idea!***

This is a profound, earth-shattering, life altering way of seeing one another and being community in a reality that transcends all our different identities.

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So this begins to shape the church and the trajectory of the church in some very unique and profound ways... ways that upset the world around them.

About 60 years after Galatians was written... Paul, along with all the original apostles, had died... but these tiny little communities of Jesus' followers scattered across the Roman Empire were starting to get noticed by their very odd ways of life.

Pliny the Younger was the Roman governor of a province right next to Galatia. He wrote a letter to the Emperor to get some advice on how to deal with this growing menace called the Christians.

Among his many complaints was the way women were allowed to hold positions of leadership in these churches... not only that they appeared to welcome all kinds of people into their community. And that was starting to upset the social order. People were getting a little uppity.

Another writer from that same century, Aristides of Athens, described Christians as this strange people who treated slaves with unusual kindness, "Any male or female slaves or dependents ... if they become Christians, they are brothers to them without discrimination."<sup>1</sup>

Around the same time, Tatian the Syrian wrote that Christians seemed to include everyone, making no "distinctions in rank and outward appearance, or wealth and education, or age and sex."<sup>2</sup>

And the stories keep going.

The church began to be seen as this radical community...

where all kinds of different, disenfranchised,

isolated, alienated people in the Roman society,

could find a deep and profound sense of belonging...

because they were no longer defined by the traditional household systems and values of their society...

They were no longer defined by the identities, and labels, and roles of the traditional Roman household. They were now being defined as brothers and sisters in the household of God.

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You see, when God calls the church into being, it calls the church to be a community of belonging... a community of belonging for all of us broken people... a community of belonging centered on only one reality, our commitment to Christ.

And that has to be true not just in what we say,  
but in our shared life together.

Gerald Sittser puts it this way. "The church's message matters a great deal, for the truth it proclaims is the precious, eternal message of the gospel. But the church's 'life together,' as Bonhoeffer called it, matters just as much, for such a community is proof that the gospel still has

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald L. Sittser, *Water from a Deep Well: Christian Spirituality from Early Martyrs to Modern*

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 56.

power to transform people's lives, to heal divisions and to provide a sense of belonging..." in a world of chaos.

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And here we sit...  
    under a few oaks...  
        on this sacred ground,  
            some 2000 years later,  
still part of that same radical people, called to be a community of belonging.

So...  
If you are hungry for something more than what life has handed you,  
if you desire an identity deeper than the labels that this world has put on you,  
if you are hungry for meaning and purpose that are more lasting than your grades at school  
or your position at work,  
if you're looking for a place to belong,  
    then you're at the right place today.

Not because we get this right all the time here at Dayspring. We don't. The truth is, we can be as bold and fickle as Peter.

But you are in the right place today, ***because we're gathered together working on the never-ending project of becoming the church.***

We're gathered together to remind each other...  
    that no matter who you are...  
    you belong to God.

Amen.