

The Law and the Faith

Isaiah 65:1-5
Galatians 3:23-29

Can you imagine living your life on the road, for years on end? In every town and city you enter you know not a soul. Sometimes you have familiar traveling companions and sometimes you do not. While an educated person, you do not speak the language of most of the people you encounter. Communications with the home office are spotty at best, and take months for a round trip between call and response. You belong to a religion with specific and restrictive rules about what you can eat and when you can work but seldom visit a place that honors those guard rails. You have a burning desire—a calling—to communicate what you believe is the best news anybody could ever hope to hear, but only a tiny fraction of people have even the slightest interest in listening. Welcome to the world of the Apostle Paul.

Paul was a Jew. A Pharisee as a matter of fact. And once he became a Jesus follower he found himself in conflict with almost everybody, almost all of the time. Most of his fellow Jews could not comprehend his conversion and wanted nothing to do with it. Most of his fellow Roman citizens could not comprehend his identification with the lesser classes and wanted nothing to do with it. Most of his fellow Christians could not comprehend his intensity and wanted to keep their distance from it. But he had a message. He had the Good News. And he was not the kind of person who could

back away from that. Some time before he wrote the words we read this morning he had traveled through a region in central Turkey called Galatia. He had preached the Gospel and started churches in numerous places. It had seemed like a resounding success. But in the following years his correspondents reported things that made him question whether the whole effort had been worth it.

What were those things? That the Galatian people were getting confused about what Jesus had accomplished. And their confusion arose from a misunderstanding of the Gospel common to this very day. How do we satisfy God? How can we have confidence in our standing before God? Is it through obedience, or faith? The correct answer is faith. The common answer is obedience. Obedience is a good thing, usually. It depends on the powers that be and their values, but generally speaking, obedience is a good thing. I took one of our new Afghan guests and her four year-old son to Baeslers and WalMart this week. The child is smart but a bit of an imp. In the WalMart parking lot he tried to escape her grasp and run across a traffic lane. A vehicle was coming and may not have been able to stop in time had she not held on to his hand. Obedience to wise and loving entities is good.

But sadly, obedience gained an unwarranted status in the early Christian church and still retains it. Because too often, the entities in charge are unwise and unloving. The Apostle Paul was forced to focus much of his correspondence on this issue. In Galatians 3 his argument goes thus: God made a covenant with Abraham. That covenant promised that so long as the Hebrews worshiped and obeyed God, God

would bless them with descendants and a land of their own. Later (Paul writes it was 430 years later), God communicated the law of God in detail to Moses, who shared it with the children of Abraham. This next point is crucial. According to Paul, the purpose of that law was to serve as a “disciplinarian” for the people of God. It imprisoned and guarded them. It served as a mother's hand holding her child back from running into certain injury and potential death.

In Paul's mind the law of God protected the people of God for thousands of years. But when Christ came that ended. While the law of God remained righteous, obedience to it no longer sheltered those who followed it. With the appearance of Jesus Christ appeared also the new qualifier for salvation: faith in him as the Son of God. Galatians 3:26: “for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God *through faith*.” This verse comes as close as it possible to come to a one sentence summary of his entire teaching. “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God *through faith*.” Paul the Pharisee certainly never lost his devotion to obeying the law of God. But Paul the Christian missionary relegated obedience to the law of God to a subservient place relative to faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

And Paul has one more profound point to make in our passage. He writes of being “baptized into Christ.” We know from the book of Acts that he performed baptisms. Yet he refers here not to the physical act of getting baptized, but to the deeper reality that baptisms signify. He refers to entering into a relationship with the risen Christ. He refers to being “in Christ”, to the connection with God that faith makes

possible. The waters of baptism symbolize a number of interrelated things, among them our initiation into the club, our entry into fellowship with our fellow redeemed, saved brothers and sisters, all of us children of God, and all of it dependent on our faith in Jesus. When we get baptized into Christ we enter into relationship not only with God, but with each other.

Paul concludes the paragraph of our passage with lovely imagery of inclusion. In Christ there is no male and female, no slave or free, no longer Jew and non-Jew, only one fellowship of Jesus followers. At Baesler's with our Afghan guests last week we met three members of this church. They come from three households and we met them in three separate aisles. Each one of them took pains to extend a heartfelt welcome to mother and child. When we got into my hot, hot car the mother, in her provisional English, said to me, "Who those people are?" As our training has stressed that we not emphasize our Christianity to our Muslim guests, I said, "They are friends of mine." She said, "Friends. I see love in their eyes. Thank you." My friends were in a sense obeying the law of God. They were extending acceptance and hospitality. But what they were really doing, instinctively, was extending the love of Christ. It was perceived after a fashion and deeply appreciated.

And that is how being in Christ by faith works. And that is how the love of God gets communicated. Obedience is fine. Faith is better. Together they are best of all.