



A Church Divided

Birth of the Church

About the Story

Today the Apostle Paul continues his Letter to the Galatians. As we learned last week, at the point of this letter-writing, Paul had previously visited Galatia on a missionary journey. Since his visit, he has heard that the Galatian people have believed other teachers' messages that happen to contradict what Paul preached to them. He is not pleased about this.

The issue here, for Paul, is the role of the "law"—religious rituals and practices from the Torah—in one's journey to becoming one of God's people. The specific rituals in question for the Galatians include

circumcision, dietary laws, and keeping the Sabbath. Paul makes it very clear that because of Jesus, there is only one so-called "requirement" to being a child of God: faith in Jesus, which is not really a requirement at all but a gift from God.

Today Paul continues to lay out his argument against the Galatians' other preachers. He explains the true function of the law using the Greek term *paidagogos* (Galatians 3:24, 25), translated in the NRSV as "disciplinarian." The *paidagogos* was a role found in Greek and Roman families. The person was usually a slave and in charge of keeping the family's children safe when they were not at school. Paul most likely uses this term not as much to imply the law as a punishment but as a custodian, tutor, or schoolmaster.

The final verses of today's readings might sound familiar, as they are often quoted as a great statement of identity in Christ. The distinctions Paul mentions in verse 28 do not necessarily mean that tradition, ethnicity, social class, and gender do not matter in the eyes of God or in the

The Point:

God's grace is a gift for all. The many walls we build up between each other are torn down by God's grace and mercy. This means that all are welcome and loved in the eyes of God—everyone within your congregation, in your surrounding neighborhood and community, and all over the world! This passage reminds us that our differences (i.e. gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation) should not be barriers to relationships with each other and especially with God. However, our differences are still important to recognize as we seek to learn about each other and our unique perspectives on life and faith.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week Paul began his argument that God does not establish requirements to be included among God's people. Today the argument goes beyond circumcision to include virtually any form of human distinction. Next week is Pentecost: the day we celebrate the Holy Spirit's coming down to the apostles. As we read in Galatians today, this Spirit is the power by which we are given God's grace.

Christian community. What Paul does seem to mean is that these distinctions are not barriers to a life with God and, because of this, they must not be barriers in true Christian community.

Opening Prayer

Start your time together with this, or another, prayer:

Holy Spirit, open our eyes to the ways you have opened the whole world to God's love. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Into the Story

Start out youth-group style! Play a quick rendition of the “shoe game”—either using shoes or chairs. If you play with shoes, have everyone stand in a circle and take off their shoes. Each person begins standing beside their own pair of shoes. Leave one pair of shoes outside of the circle so one person is left to stand in the middle of the circle. If you play with chairs, have each person except one sit in a chair around a circle, with one person standing in the middle. The middle person begins by saying, “I am from Minnesota” or some other identifier. Then everyone who is also from Minnesota (or also shares the other identifier) moves to another space with shoes or to another chair, leaving a new person in the middle. The new person states a new identifier, and you keep going until your group is properly warmed up. This game will serve to remind you of the “distinctions” within your group.

Learning the Story

The Apostle Paul continues his Letter to the Galatians by introducing the Spirit's role in creating children of God, and by stating that there are no barriers to God's love.

Read Galatians 3:1-9 – The Experience of the Spirit

- ❓ Paul uses questions to get his point across. What tone of voice do you imagine he would use if he were saying these things aloud?
- ❓ How is Paul connecting Jesus' life, death, and resurrection with his theology (belief about who God is)?
- ❓ What do you think Paul means by “foolish?” What synonyms would you use?
- ❓ Paul suggests that the Galatians “started with the Spirit, (and) are now ending with the flesh.” What do you think this means? Do you relate to this in your own faith?
- ❓ Abraham is mentioned in verses 6-9. What do you remember about the story of Abraham, and how does Paul's statement connect to it?
- ❓ What does Paul mean by being “blessed with Abraham?”

Bible Connections

- ✚ The “offspring” mentioned in verse 29 broadens the reach of God's promise to Abraham to include Gentiles (Genesis 15:6).
- ✚ The “male and female” distinctions echo the creation story and imply that in this “new creation” in Christ, unity overrides these distinctions (Genesis 1:27).
- ✚ The term “children of God” appears elsewhere in the Bible (John 1:12, Romans 8:14-17).

Read Galatians 3:23-29 – The Purpose of the Law

- ❓ See information under About the Story about the term translated “disciplinarian.” What modern-day roles are like this sort of disciplinarian? How do those rules affect what you think of as the “law?”
- ❓ What does it look like in your life to be “imprisoned and guarded under the law?”
- ❓ What do you think Paul means by being “clothed with Christ” (verse 27)?
- ❓ What modern-day distinctions would you add to Paul’s list in verse 28?
- ❓ What does it mean for you to be a child or heir of God?

Supplies needed

- ✚ Small square sheets of paper and paint, or newspapers, magazines and scissors
- ✚ Glue
- ✚ Poster board or mural paper

Living the Story: Fellowship

This fellowship activity is designed to encourage relationships by recognizing our common identity in Christ. You might want to have snacks available so the “art studio” atmosphere is one that encourages casual fun and conversation.

Create a painting or mosaic that says “one in Christ,” as in verse 28. You may have participants each create small square paintings that you glue together to spell “one in Christ” (or just “one” if that is easiest) or work all together to cut out pictures from newspapers and magazines. Be sure your creations are colorful or, as relevant, your newspaper or magazine photos are diverse.

Closing Prayer

Naming the colors or photos in your group’s artwork, offer this popcorn (participants offer their thoughts) prayer:

Holy Spirit, we are many; we are one. We thank you for... (participants “popcorn” colors or photo descriptions)... We thank you for the many gifts they bring to the kingdom of God. We are many; we are one. In the name of our one Lord, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Paul’s Travels/Bible Maps

Bible maps help us understand the setting of the stories in the Bible; we can read the stories with greater understanding when we understand where they take place. Just imagine hearing a story from a friend’s travels, not knowing whether it took place in the Alaskan wilderness or in downtown Miami. Depending on which of these places were the actual site of the story, you would have an entirely different sense of the landscape, the temperature, the culture, etc. Location is important!

Paul’s missionary journeys took place in the first-century Roman Empire, particularly the eastern Mediterranean. In terms of today’s story, first-century Galatia is widely considered by scholars to be where Turkey is today. Considering these contexts, Paul most likely traveled on foot in dangerous desert heat. Paul’s letters were generally delivered by other individuals, who are sometimes mentioned within the letters—for example, Phoebe in Romans 16:1.

At Home

- ✚ Create a personal version of the group artwork, using colors, photos, or words that particularly speak to you. Include references to persons with whom you disagree to remind yourself that you are “One in Christ.”
- ✚ Worship at a congregation of another denomination or faith tradition this week or next weekend, keeping an ear and eye out for the common ways you worship God.
- ✚ Think about a “*paidagagos*” in your own life—someone who keeps you safe and comforted or did so in your childhood. Write a note of thanks to that person. If the person is deceased, write an entry in your journal about them or send a note of thanks to one of their surviving loved ones.

Daily Readings

Sunday – Read Galatians 3:1-8, 23-29

Paul writes about the Spirit’s role in making us one in Christ. Search online for a prayer from another Christian tradition to offer throughout the day.

Monday – Read Genesis 15:1-6

God promises the childless Abram that he and his wife Sarai will have many offspring; this is a founding promise for Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Offer a kind word to someone from one of these other faith traditions today, recognizing that you are both recipients of this promise.

Tuesday – Read Galatians 3:15-18

Paul relates the promise to Abraham to the promise through Christ. Make a promise today to one of your loved ones: commit to something you know will be meaningful to them, and fulfill the promise by the end of the week.

Wednesday – Read Galatians 3:19-22

Paul clarifies that the law itself is not contradictory to God’s promises; it is our sin that misunderstands the true purpose of the law. In this spirit, practice sabbath today by taking at least 30 minutes of rest.

Thursday – Read Galatians 4:8-20

Paul reminds the Galatians of their friendship, hoping to help restore their relationship. Begin the work of reconciliation with a friend or family member with whom you have a damaged relationship: call them, write to them, or simply begin praying for the strength to do so.

Friday – Read Galatians 4:21-31

Paul alludes to the stories of Hagar and Sarah. Read Genesis 16 and Genesis 21 today so you can agree or disagree with Paul’s connections to slavery and freedom.

Saturday – Read Galatians 5:1-15

Paul again emphasizes that faith, not works, is the only true mark of life with God. Faith, Paul says, works through love. Today bring food to a local pantry or perform another act of “faith working through love.”