

Galatians 3:1-9, 23-29

I am not sure we can ever read Galatians quite as Paul meant it, because of the centuries of Christian anti-semitism that color our lenses as we look back. Paul is engaged in an internal Jewish debate about the nature and role of Torah. He has not rejected Judaism; he has not “converted” to Christianity. He does not condemn Judaism as a legalistic religion. What he *is* doing is trying to widen the conception of God’s people to include those who were not given Torah, and to do it on the grounds that God planned it that way from the very beginning. He points to the covenant between Abraham and God on which both parties acted *before* circumcision was commanded. God always intended to bring in people who were not under the Law, and now God is doing just that. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.”

That is Paul’s message to a gentile church who’ve been told that they need to pick up and observe the Law in order to be saved. And that’s the second problem for us, trying to read Galatians as Paul meant it, because Paul was an apocalypticist who expected the imminent return of Christ and some kind of sorting out of people who would live with Christ and those who would not. That is simply not my expectation, or yours, I think. And the notion that God would ever reject or abandon anybody, even the most heinous among us, is now implausible to me, and I think to you. I cannot accept Paul’s terms; they are anachronistic. But I think we can accept the trajectory of movement toward God that he suggests.

In Paul’s view, those who have joined the Jesus movement are still who we are—Jews or Greeks, etc. BUT our identities are no longer governed by our contrasts. Our identities are no

longer *governed* by our contrasts. I want to be very careful here, because it sounds dangerously like when white people say that they don't see color, as a way of avoiding dealing with the very real effects of the social construct of race. Cultural differences still matter. But *status differences* do not exist in the life of faith. Our identities are not governed by our contrasts; we are in communion through our fellowship in Christ. The trajectory that Paul describes is a trajectory of expansion and inclusion, initiated by God. And in the 21st century, this radical re-ordering of human relationships before God needs to go farther. The implications of Paul's vision are ever-widening circles, beyond the communities of faith, to communities of other faiths and no faiths—in our eyes, all God's children. And salvation is not being spared from eternal outcastness, but fullness of life in the areas under human control, because everybody matters.

I heard third-hand that one Jewish understanding of the role of the Law is that it's to restore order after the chaos that began with the Fall from Eden. Law slowly re-orders and redeems the world, by means of observances, healthy eating, healthy relationships—that is, following Torah is a way to make the world anew wherever you are. That's sort of what Paul is beckoning the Galatians toward: connecting even through difference because God is always healing the world, and now God's messiah has rendered our status differences meaningless. Connecting through difference, widening the circle, making the world anew right where we are—that's what I think we can take from this part of the letter to the Galatians.

John Powell, a professor of law at UC Berkeley, a civil rights expert, and director of the Othering and Belonging Institute, said at a conference on bridging differences, "We think the universe is made of atoms. It's not. It's made of stories." We each have our own story, our

“narrative myth,” if you will, that contains heroes and villains that help us or hold us back, major events that determine the plot, challenges we’ve overcome and suffering that has damaged us. When we want people to understand us, we share our story with them, and when we want to understand another person, we ask for their story.ⁱ The universe is made of stories in the sense that its meaning comes from our stories, and the meaning of our stories tears the universe apart or pulls it together and renews it.

But the stories don’t just happen to us. We make narrative choices. For instance, three different people might have been afraid of the water as children, and had parents who forced them to learn to swim. One might tell that story as an example of how you can overcome difficulties and rise to challenges; another might tell the story to show why parents are brutal and can’t be trusted, and the third might not tell the story because it’s just not important. Dan McAdams, a psychologist at Northwestern, says that people who want to contribute to society and to future generations are more likely to tell redemptive stories about their lives—stories that transition from bad to good. One man grew up in dire poverty but saw it as having brought him and his family closer together. Another woman underwent a harrowing experience, caring for a dying friend, but it renewed her commitment to being a nurse after she’d abandoned that career. Those people see their lives as more meaningful than those who tell stories with few or no redemptive sequences, and those people literally contribute more to the flourishing of creation.

The stand-up comic and TV host Kamau Bell tells a story about the troubled relationship he had with his wife’s grandfather. Bell is Black and his wife is white, and grandpa was really just not having it. He would ignore Bell at family gatherings, and this went on so long that Bell

decided he would no longer subject himself to that treatment; he would stay home. So at that point his wife wrote a letter to her grandfather and said, Grandpa, you have to be nice to my husband or none of us are coming any more. So when Thanksgiving came, Bell and his family went to Grandpa's, and Grandpa shook hands with Bell and hugged his wife, and nothing dramatic happened but it broke the ice. What I think is interesting about this is that while Bell is fully cognizant of how Grandpa felt, and is quite a sophisticated analyst of racism and white supremacy, the larger story he tells is about what a great family man Grandpa was, how much family meant to him, and how he could see that Bell felt the same way. He's not pretending the other stuff didn't happen, or that Grandpa wasn't culpable for bad behavior, but he sees it as a thing they grew past on their way to taking better care of their family. And he sees himself as a person who always has opportunities to mend creation.

That's the personal narrative, if you will—or the story arc—that Paul is providing us. Beyond the historical, theological circumstances of first-century Jews living with all the awkwardness of Diaspora social relationships, Paul is pointing us to see that the story of the people of God is one of growing openness and a celebration of the variety within God's family. The public story of the church, at least in America, is discouragingly small-minded: focused on purity and upholding cultural norms, intolerant of dissent, condescending or suspicious of those who practice another religion or no religion. We have to tell a different story! According to Paul, the church is called to widen the circle, listen to those who are unheard, learn from those who are strange to us. Whenever that happens, in however small a way, creation is more mended and salvation has come.

With great joy we receive the gift of salvation which is ours not because of our own efforts, but because of the saving work of Christ. Grant us full access to the glory of your salvation, an

abundance that is more than enough for all humankind, for the sake of our redeeming Christ.
Amen.

ⁱ https://ideas.ted.com/the-two-kinds-of-stories-we-tell-about-ourselves/?utm_content=buffereeade&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer