

# GALATIANS

## THOSE CRAZY CELTS

### REJECTION – A NORM OF FREEDOM

*'Always a bracing experience'* (J.S. O'Leary)

*'Had I not become a follower of Saint Paul or had I suppressed the scandal of the gospel, I would probably have become bored...I could not see my way to living a right middleclass life in a world that had never felt the hangman's noose'* [Ernst Kasemann]

### SUMMARY

*Galatians were from the north of Turkey, they were descended from Celtic tribes (the Gauls), they were mountain men, strong, uncontrollable. The local religion was a worship of the 'Mother of the gods', the Strong Woman of the mountains. Her greatest devotee, or slave, was Attis, beardless, young, castrated, androgenous. He was their ideal. They had shown some interest in Judaism. They had thought of being circumcised (it must have looked a bit like Attis worship). Jews from Antioch strongly advocated this. Paul said a vehement NO to it. He even said that Christianity was free from such 'mountain religion' practices – including the practices of Jews from 'Mount Zion' in Jerusalem! As a result, he and those who followed him, were said by Jews to be cursed – outside the Law. Paul retorted that the curse was the price of freedom – if you were outside the Law then the Law had no power over you. Baptism, the rite of initiation into the crucified Christ, was a baptism into the curse and the freedom, all at once. It made a Christian free from all laws of all religions and cultures. Then a Christian had to live that freedom face to face with everyone who wanted to restrict it. Living like that was entering into the life of resurrection. Resurrection wasn't an instant thing, it was an age-long thing. It wasn't an act of God once, but a process in which God and the 'cursed-free' ones worked together for the transformation and freedom of everyone, whoever they were. H.D.Betz says this letter to the Galatians is 'one of the most important documents of mankind'.*

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**'I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me....' Gal 2,20**

### GALATIA

Through his work in Galatia, and his subsequent letter to the Galatians, Paul came to a much more developed understanding of 'living resurrectionally'. In comparison with his Galatian vision, what he saw in Thessaloniki and Philippi seems rather elementary....

It is not fully clear where the 'Galatia' in which Paul worked, and to which he wrote, really is. The term 'Galatians' refers to Gallic tribes (Gauls, Celts) who are obviously not

Jews, and who have lived around Asia Minor for some time before Paul. At the time of Paul, the term 'Galatia' was used both for an ethnic group and for an administrative region under Roman control.

There is a difference between southern and northern Galatia (in the administrative sense). It seems the Galatians of our interest here are from the north of Asia Minor (Turkey) and have some link with Celts. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century bce, wandering Celtic warlike tribes were in central to northern Galatia, around Ancyra (modern Ankara in Turkey). There is still a minority group of Christians in Ankara. They had the same racial roots as the Irish. They had been defeated by Greeks in the past, more than once. A remnant of them seems to have remained in the area. [CeLT=GaLaT] [Cf. **The Dying Gaul**, a statue in the Capitoline Museum, Rome, the original of which is bronze in Pergamum. He is on his last legs!]. A study of these people has remarkable parallels with studies of **the 'dying out' of Irish-type Catholicism in present Australian culture, for whom the Dying Gaul could be a symbol.**

*I have added a picture of 'the Dying Gaul' to suggest the demise of these Galatians, and perhaps to raise questions about the dying-out of a traditional Celtic model of being Church here in Australia (and elsewhere)..... See picture attachment. I wonder if Paul has written, unknowingly, a letter to this 'dying' church-culture????*



*The Dying Gaul, a Roman marble copy of a Hellenistic work of the late third century BC Capitoline Museums, Rome.*

There has been a presence of Jews there too, and many of the Galatians had been Jewish sympathizers without becoming Jews through circumcision and Torah acceptance. Paul is working for both Gentiles and Jews in Galatia. Significant in the Jewish groups there was, in all probability, a cohort converted to Christianity from some rather austere Essene-type communities.

J.Dunn regards the debate about which group Paul worked in and wrote to, as unresolved. He seems to lean to southern Galatia. Crossan and Reed take it for granted it is northern

Galatia. If the letter is written to the north, it is written in the mid-fifties. If it is written to the south, it must be earlier, 48-49, and would be the earliest of Paul's letters. In these reflections, I am taking the northern option. Some are now suggesting that Galatians was written after 1 Corinthians but before 2 Corinthians. Others suggest that 2 Cor 10-13 is earlier than 2 Cor 1-9, and that Galatians comes between the two.

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It is worth a look at the going religious practices of these people. Cf. Susan Elliott, Cutting Too Close for Comfort: Paul's Letter to the Galatians in its Anatolian Cultic Context, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 248, Sheffield Academic Press, 2004

Elliott draws attention to the specifically Anatolian situation (north Galatia). Local pagans (Gentiles, Gauls, Celts) were practising a cult of the 'Mother of the gods'. It was not a fertility cult. There had historically been many influences on this region, and there had been also many cultures and many religions and many gods introduced into the region. Each one of them seems to have 'occupied' a special geographical area, usually around a mountain – there were many mountains there. It sounds a bit like a 'Mormon zone' in Utah. In their own zones, the gods were like absolute chiefs and monarchs. A cult developed of a 'Mother of all these gods', a 'Mountain Mother'. A 'Great Mother'. She was the guardian of all the practices and written rules. She was the keeper of Law. She was strong (she is often depicted with lions!). She could keep the wilderness under control. Her cult included orgies ('controlled' because part of a religious cult) and frenzies... In the service of this Goddess, was a figure called Attis – beardless, young, recently castrated, often androgynous. They were the equivalent in some Roman religions of the Galli (there is at least a verbal connection here with the 'Gauls'). They were slaves of the Great Mother. They had initiation rituals (including castration). They practised a kind of prostitution. They were regarded as healers and prophets. They had a kind of power among the people. The people were bewitched by the whole cult of the Great Mother. [This seems to link to the acceptance of a kind of stoicheia, or of some controlling powers in their universe...]

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## **PAUL'S WORK IN GALATIA**

The real issue, in any case, is clear. Paul had had interesting connections with the leadership group of Jesus believers in Jerusalem and Antioch. Though he never accepted direct dependence on them, he did look for their support, and initially got it, from both Peter and James, particularly about his policy of not circumcising Gentile converts to Christianity. Officially they backed him up. But this changed after a confrontation with Peter in Antioch concerning the observance of kosher food laws for meals shared between Jewish and Gentile Christians. Paul stood for freedom there, Peter, in an accommodating way, and seemingly under direction from Jerusalem, stood for keeping the Jewish laws. Paul really lost, and Peter won. There is no hard evidence of the two of them getting along well ever again!

Barnabas and Paul went to Jerusalem (Gal 2,1-10) after ‘spies’ had opposed their freedom, in not demanding circumcision for converts to the Christian movement. James and Peter, in Jerusalem, agreed with Barnabas and Paul. They also agreed on two ‘missions’ – James and Peter to Jews, Barnabas and Paul to Gentiles. [This means Jewish areas and Gentile areas.] They agreed too on asking convert Gentiles for help for the poor of Jerusalem. James seems to have been able to take this position, since Jewish tradition looked to a place and time in the future when all Jews and Gentiles who believed would be one. There was divided opinion about other Gentiles who did not believe up to that end-time: would they be exterminated before this omega situation, or would they all be converted before the end. James could have held the latter view, and consistently with it, accepted no circumcision for converts to the Christian movement, in view of their uncircumcised presence with Jews in the final situation. This agreement, especially re circumcision and consequently re the demands of the Torah, did not hold up in the Christian community at Antioch.

In the diaspora cities, especially, Gentiles did not live geographically separate from Jews. All the first apostles were Jews. It was natural that sooner or later, groups of Christian Gentile-converts and groups of Christian Jewish-converts, living in the same city, would want to eat together. This had to bring up – inevitably - questions about kosher food. The practical outcome in Antioch was that kosher rules did not bind in this situation (and Peter went along with that). James however disagreed: he insisted on kosher rules for such meals (and Peter went along with that, as did everyone, seemingly, except Paul). Paul accused Peter (and the others) of hypocrisy, when they were probably simply acting out of courtesy. For Paul, it became a core issue of principle. Does righteousness come from works of Torah, or from works of faith in Christ? [If you really see that point, why still be courteous to the old point of view, when you don’t believe it?]

The issue in Galatia is largely **an intensified re-run of this situation**. Antioch was the mother church of Galatia, even if it had relatively less influence there, due to the barrier of the Taurus mountains. There would have been a natural tendency to extend the victory won against Paul at Antioch to all its daughter churches. They wanted conformity of Christian practice, and no adulteration of covenant status through not keeping the full Torah.

Either internally in the Galatian Christian community, or through the input of the new arrivals ‘from James’, there was **advocacy of circumcision for Gentile converts**. It is easy to see how it would cohere with local practice! One has to wonder if the advocacy of it was actually a kind of inculturation? Some trouble-makers or agitators – people ‘from James’ – had arrived in Galatia after Paul’s last presence there. They are taken to be Jewish Christians. They are for the observance of Torah, and the practice of circumcision, and the keeping of kosher laws, for Gentile converts there.

The issue is not a secondary one. Many (most?) of the members of the Christian group in Galatia were former ‘God-worshippers’, that is, Gentiles who had come to believe in the God of Israel, but who had not become Jews, probably because they did not want to be circumcised. They were baptized into the Christian community without circumcision.

Were they still ‘Gentiles’? Did they belong to Abraham and his seed? Were they really in the covenant?

## THE LETTER TO THE GALATIANS

This is the situation in which Paul sends his passionate letter to Galatia. It is written at white heat. It is an apologia for his gospel of freedom in Jesus Christ. Paul vigorously defends their right not to be circumcised, in the name of the best principles of Jewish theology. In any case, Paul passionately rejected the demand for circumcision and ‘Judaization’. He wrote his letter to tell the church people not to get circumcised. The real good news was a freedom from all that sort of thing, and, in that freedom, a grasp of the justice (dikaiosune) of God and the power (dynamis) of the Spirit in and through the risen Jesus.

H.D. Betz calls this letter ‘one of the most important documents of mankind’. Henry Wansborough says that it is the working out of the distinctive position of Christianity, vis a vis Judaism. It opens with details about the phases of Paul’s life that we learn nowhere else. His life-story is presented as a paradigm, representation, and embodiment of the gospel of Christian freedom. He is commissioned to this directly by God and the risen Jesus and not immediately by human leaders of the Christian movement. It is better to speak of his commission than of his conversion: he did not change religion (Jewish) but he did change his line of interpretation of that religion.

There was then a group that didn’t like what Paul was thinking and doing. They entered into open polemics with him. There were groups of the same kind in Galatia, in the Christian community there that Paul had established earlier. Their case against Paul is sophisticated, based on a Jewish understanding of the Covenant. It is about the Abrahamic covenant, and the Mosaic covenant. They and Paul agree that it all goes back to Abraham, and his greatness is his faith.

Taking their text from Gn 17 (*covenant with Abraham*) [a ‘Priestly’ tradition], they insisted on the reciprocal duties of covenant: God promised progeny and land, and, reciprocally, the people of the covenant had to be circumcised.

*Paul replied using Gn 15 [a ‘Jahwist’ tradition of the Abraham covenant], that never mentions circumcision.*

His opponents retorted that the burden of all the texts was indeed faith, but faith with circumcision.

*To this Paul replied with arguments from the LXX version of Gn (used by him from memory, without access to sources). He agrees and stresses that it is living by faith that really makes anyone righteous.*

They say, correctly on their terms, that the Jews, the progeny of Abraham, are blessed because they truly live by faith when they live by the book of the Torah. The true

offspring of Abraham do that. They are indeed **cursed** if they don't. Gentiles who are converted to the life of faith (not originally being offspring of Abraham) must then, in their logic, be converted to living according to the Torah. They are cursed if they don't. Circumcision is a test case of this.

*Paul's reply is fascinating. [It is a case of thinking on his feet, but it is also a case of coming to a new awareness of what he was all about.] He **distinguishes their kind of faith from his own.** Theirs is faith in the offspring of Abraham (the Jewish people), and in the life of the Torah. His is faith in the real offspring of Abraham, Christ, and so it does not have to be in the life of the Torah. They believe in an institution, he believes in a living person. There is a different phenomenology of Pauline faith.*

They retort that this person that Paul believes in is **cursed by the Torah itself**. The Torah had cursed everyone who hangs on a tree, Christ was hung on a tree, (i.e. crucified), so – implicitly – the Torah cursed Christ.

*By our faith in Christ, we are in Him, says Paul, and so we too are cursed by the Torah. But **if anyone is cursed by the Torah, he is not obliged to keep the Torah!** The Torah-cursed Christ is not so obliged. The Torah-cursed Christians-in-Christ are not so obliged. Our faith is not just in a person, it is in the freedom of a person who has been cursed by the system and so freed from the system. We can be justified by this different kind of faith, in the person of the crucified (and cursed) Christ. When we accept our identification with him and participate in the curse the Torah laid on him, then we are free....from circumcision and all else. We have the freedom left to us by Abraham in our faith in the cursed-freed Christ. Cursed-freed becomes equivalent to crucified-risen.*

*You've got to say that nobody will ever understand this, in any system of organizing people and dominating them, even by law, and they will curse you because you are not doing it their way. But it's to the extent that you are **prepared to be cursed by them, for not doing it their way, that you are actually free.***

Paul wins this stage of the argument, but he does not convince his adversaries. His case depends on a radical approach to both law and freedom.

In this argument, Paul used a fascinating series of allegorical connections to make his case. His allegorical imagination is larger than our own. His 'logic' in linking various allegories is a long way from our own. But it is the same kind of rhetoric that his opponents also use. It is very Jewish in that sense. That I think is one of the ultimate ironies in his case against his opponents. He takes them on, and thinks he wins, on their own grounds....

He thinks of castration and circumcision. He thinks of mountain religion in Galatia and the religion of mount Zion in Jerusalem. He thinks of Hagar and Sara, the two wives of

Abraham: one was a slave-girl, the other a free-woman. So he makes a contrast between castration-Galatian mountain religion-Hagar(slavery)-Gentiles (Ismael), and circumcision-mount Zion religion- Sara –Jews (Isaac). A perceptive analyst might say that the weakness in the parallel is that Sara was a free woman... Paul knew that, but he speaks as a convinced believer in Jesus. Paul suggests that Sara's children, the Jews of Jerusalem, have not kept to her freedom, but have actually fallen back into the ways of slavery by insisting on circumcision so much, and so virtually equating themselves with the mountain men of Galatia! Clearly, he wants to show that only in the cursed-risen Jesus can there be that real freedom – without circumcision! Circumcision is a counter-sign to all this!

He says there is now a mountain in Arabia called 'Hagar', and the inhabitants there are Gentiles, slaves of pagan cults and rites. He daringly goes on to say that Jerusalem (mount Zion) is a mountain in Judea. The inhabitants there, the Jews, also practise a mountain religion – called Judaism! They are slaves to its Torah! Jerusalem is actually the equivalent of a temple-state inhabited by slaves who live under a severe stoicheia (cosmic control system) called Torah! The primary sign and index of belonging to this slave-religion is to get circumcised. If you get circumcised, it is equivalent to becoming such a slave, and losing the freedom which is the rightful inheritance of Israel...He is clearly, and dangerously, equating circumcision among the Jews with castration among the Galatians!

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His opponents moved to their second argument. It was about the *Mosaic covenant*. They retorted: "OK, Paul. You reckon you're free. But we are free. **We are free by keeping Torah.**" They said that Abraham had two sons (Isaac and Ishmael). Isaac was the child of a free woman, Sarah. Ishmael was the child of a slave woman, Hagar. Abraham drove out Hagar the slave-woman, so that Sarah, the free woman, and all her progeny (= us Jews) remain free. Mount Sinai, where Moses gave us the covenant, is the home of the free. We Jews don't belong to the tradition of slavery, the Gentiles (in Arabia) do. We have **a freedom in our observance of the Mosaic covenant**. We are not like the galli in Galatia!

Paul has an almost vicious response. He agrees that the present Jerusalem (Mount Sion) is ideologically the same as Mount Sinai, but he says that Mount Sinai is in Arabia! [He is playing with the sound of 'Sinai' and 'Sion', and he is – in a rather dirty way – hinting that they are all Arabians anyway...] This means, for him, that the present Jerusalem is in slavery – and this is clearly seen in the slavery that the Mosaic Law demands of those who are believing Jews in 'Jerusalem'! Paul wants a freedom from even the Mosaic Law, and from the practice of 'Jerusalem'. He can only claim that through a very different faith.... He has gone even further than his first retort to their argument from Abraham. He has moved from Jerusalem!

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I would like to pause, here, before going on with a reading of Galatians. I would like to muse about **Paul's relationship to the Jewish law, the Torah**, and so to wonder if Paul is still a 'real Jew'.

Jesus was always a circumcised Jew. Jesus in his identity is Jewish (by circumcision); Jesus in behavior is Torah observant, always; Jesus in his interpretation of his own behavior invents his own halakah. Halakah is taken here to mean an interpretative expansion of the Law as someone grasps and lives it and communicates it to others. Many scholars now write of Jesus' teachings in this way.

Paul was always a circumcised Jew. Paul in his identity is a Jew (by circumcision); but Paul in behavior is Torah free, completely; Paul in his behavior is so Torah free that he needs no halakah of his own and has none. That is the view of many interpreters of Paul. Some, however, usually Jews themselves, suggest that Paul did develop a halakah that allowed him to believe in Jesus within Torah as he grasped and lived it. What halakah?

When Paul dealt with Jews (circumcised, Torah bound) who believed in Jesus, he treated them like himself. When Paul dealt with non-Jews, (non-Torah bound) who believed in Jesus, he insisted that they do not become Jews (be circumcised and be Torah bound). In his halakah, then, he had to distinguish between the historical 'people of Israel' and a larger more amorphous 'people of God'. Jews believing in Jesus were in both. Gentiles believing in Jesus were only in the latter, not the former. This lets Gentiles be Gentiles and Jews be Jews. It is admirable, ecumenically.

**My own instincts are different.** Once Paul had experienced the Risen One, he seems to me to have changed in regard to every possible binary set of concepts. Including the binary set of Jew and Gentile (circumcised and non circumcised). I think the experience changed the locus of his basic identity. He no longer looked to any one member of a binary set for his identity. So in a real sense, the experience did change him so radically that his primary identity was not being a Jew (only a residual 'public identification' remained). No, he didn't become a Gentile either. He became 'not I, but Christ lives in me', as he puts it to Galatians. You can't contain the Damascus experience within the parameters of Torah and Jewish identity for Paul. It changed Paul's radical identity. In a similar way, the people Paul takes to faith in the Risen One (be they previously Jews or Gentiles) change their radical identity. That is why for any of them, being Torah bound or non Torah bound is a secondary matter. They are all in principle free from taking that issue as primary. I don't think it bothered Paul in a basic way. Perhaps that is why he was and is misunderstood from both sides of the binary set!

I would not then personally want to use the word halakah for Paul's understanding of this transcending-the-binary position. Halakah as I understand it is a subset of one member of the set that says Torah: non-Torah. It is a subset of the Torah. But there is another term we might perhaps think of using. It is pushing the term in ways I am not aware of in authors, but I wonder if you could say he has a haggadah for his whole life experience, and that it is a resurrectional haggadah? Haggadah is basically story, narrative, a putting together of incidents that embellish one's faith. I think Paul often did tell his own story, the story of his weakness, to embellish his faith in the centrality of being grasped by the Risen One.

‘I am I, because I am no longer what I believed myself to be, the old I that used to live in me, but another who in making the gift of his life to me, has **revealed himself-in-me to me**’.

‘It is no more I that lives in me, in virtue of all my qualities, but it is the confidence in the unconditional love which has been placed and is being placed in me that **creates me as me**’.

‘I have then changed God. Or better, in manifesting himself as the Father of the Crucified, **God has changed my God for me**’. [quotations from Moi, Paul, F.Vouga]

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Let’s return to our reading of Galatians.

Paul’s argument above leads him to thoughts about **baptism** (not circumcision). Baptism is a symbolic immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus. Once we believe, in the new faith in the cursed one (who took on the curse of the cross out of love for the oppressed), once we are symbolised by baptism into his ‘state’, we are all equal together as ‘baptised’ into that strange state of curse=freedom. There is no Jew or Gentile, no male or female, no slave or ‘free’. It is a belief in the ‘death-state’ of Jesus as the ‘life-state’ of those who are truly set free thereby... You only get to that, by being baptised into the ‘curse’ of the cross!

*‘As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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’ Gal 3, 27-29*

Baptism was being practised in the Christian community before Paul. And baptism is a ritual of immersion in those days, - it’s a symbolic immersion into the death and resurrection of Jesus. At this stage, Paul says: “Yes, but you are **baptized and immersed into his curse**. Don’t get baptized, if you don’t want to be in that position politically.” And it’s a baptism into that strange condition, when **Christ-cursed is your freedom**. So it’s probably an argument for not getting baptized, I reckon, for most people. It’s something that I think most people, who get baptized, don’t realize, and I’m not just talking about infants either. You are taking on something enormously big. But if you live the **implications of resurrection** right, you’ll be **ostracized**, and it’s in the being ostracized that you will, for the first time, experience the **reality of resurrection**. You can’t have one without the other. You can’t have resurrection without death. You can’t have freedom without curse. You can’t have inclusion without exclusion. It’s really saying that the demand on potential candidates for baptism is pretty heavy. Probably the church has got a bit of educational wisdom in not telling them beforehand. But there’s something profound there. Baptism demands a change in your politics!

Once we believe, in the new faith in the cursed one (who took on the curse of the cross out of love for the oppressed), once we are symbolized by baptism into his 'state', we are all equal together as 'baptized' into that strange state of curse=freedom. But once we are **baptized into that curse/freedom, no Torah can ever touch any of us**. And there's no distinction between good boys/girls and bad boys/girls in terms of rules and regulations. Everybody is equalized there. There's no possible distinction then based on race, like Jew or Gentile, or gender, like male or female, or status, like slave or free. It is a belief in the 'death-state' or the 'curse-state' of Jesus as the 'life-state' of those who are truly set free by this belief...an equal life-state for everybody. It's an equal freedom for everybody, who is baptized into the 'curse' of the cross! Baptism is an unusual social process!

*'As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 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' Gal 3, 27-29*

That's breath-taking, if you stop and think of it. I think it's actually quite huge - **the price of it**, if you like, - but you can't pay the price and buy it - it's not for sale. It's a **losing of acceptance**, of approbation of other civic systems, and the people who run them. It's that kind of a turn-around there.

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It raises the question of the **difference between a good Catholic and a Pauline Christian**. If you're a good Catholic, still enjoying the approval of the rules in the Catholic Church, Paul will tell you, you don't know what it's all about. You don't know what you're missing. That's the power of it, as I see it. I don't think he is masochistic, or that he invites people to put themselves into situations where they will get kicked out. He's just saying **it's going to happen anyway**. I don't think you have to make it happen yourself: life will do it to you.

This is what he has come to grasp as the place where **the meaning of resurrection comes through**. He's seeing in the whole mystery of such 'refused' people **an actual instance of rising from the dead**. This would change, I think, a lot of attitudes towards people, who don't keep the rules completely. If you look at it that way, it's **resurrection**, all right. Paul has come to see that resurrection is **not one instant on an Easter Sunday**. It's **an age of history**. It's not just an act of God, though God is in it, and acting. It's **an ongoing dynamism**, in which there is **divine and human cooperation**, with socio-political results in the present world. And it's carried on by those who have experienced the combination of **curse and freedom**. And I think he says there's no Christ-life that is not so involved. It's an extraordinary sort of a reflection actually. Till God's grace or **God's dynamic meets you where you are** - and Paul would say it never leaves you where you are - it changes you - **it transforms you**. The process by which it changes and transforms you is a process that puts you into an experience and a taste of the curse of the law, and in and through that, without it being taken away, you get an experience

and a taste of freedom from all law. I think **the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus delivers us from all law**. It's that Romans kind of expression that he's talking about really. [This is not what Jewish eschatology, or James, thought was going to happen in the future.] You don't theoretically or doctrinally believe in the resurrection of Jesus. You take part in the **living process of general resurrection** that began with Jesus, and you contribute to it. You, Jesus, God, everyone are all equal in that process, since you are all together under the curse-liberation of the law-system. It is now, all together, all equal, all free.

If Paul is talking about this to people who have been baptized and had that experience, they might say to him: "Well, Paul, we are free. We can do what we like now." And he would say: "Not on your life! – No, you don't - not if you are going to be **faithful to the dynamic of curse/freedom** – or crucifixion/resurrection. And you have to be faithful to that." And some of those in Corinth could say to him: "Well, we usually blow up and get violent about three times a week." And Paul says: "Not any more, you don't, if you are going to really live your baptism." Or, "We usually sleep out with some of the Corinthian women every weekend." And Paul says: "Not any more. Sorry." So there are **realities of "noblesse oblige"** that he wouldn't read as impositions of law. It is rather an implication of this strange gift.

But he is constantly bringing it down to **his reality and their reality**. And the rest of it is largely **metaphors** flying around in the background.

But that is very typical of Paul I think. I don't think he actually persuaded too many people of what it was all about. He gets these people around and they sort of get a feeling or a sense of who he is and what the experience is, and they catch the experience, sometimes without knowing what it means or putting words on it – well, they still do, don't they? – but I think **very few ever grasp just that profound**, challenging, delicate, beautiful **point that Paul was coming to himself**. And Paul was saying it's there in your life. And they were hearing confirmedness, but I don't think they always knew what Paul was confirming in them, and I think that is probably part of his cross. He **never quite knew that he got through** – and often he probably didn't, that would be my hunch. Most people prefer law to their freedom. No one wants to be cursed.

And he often probably found some others around that were putting it in some other ways he would not be satisfied with – especially writers of **pseudo-Pauline letters** after him? But that would be the kind of thing that I think he's constantly working on. I think one of the most challenging or demanding ways of trying to pin down this **resurrection** thing is actually getting into this language of curse. It's a profoundly difficult concept for somebody who believes in inclusion, to say **you only get included through the experience of exclusion**. He would lose a lot of friends by saying. My guess is that he actually did. But he's constantly trying to wrestle with that issue – through his whole life.

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This whole argument is actually a **development of Paul's understanding of the resurrection process** - that the resurrection process included crucifixion into

resurrection. Well Paul wasn't going to get physically crucified and most of his friends weren't either, but they were going to be put on the outer by the Jewish community, cursed by the Law, and even rejected by the pillars of the early church. Paul is saying here that the resurrection process is including their experience of that **curse of elimination** into their experience of resurrection. And I think that's bringing it right home to the hard facts that he loves to do all the time. But it's really demanding even more of his Christian community than he was when we were talking about him earlier. He's actually saying: "It's going to taste awful, but **the tasting awful is the taste of freedom**". And I think that's very, very challenging and profound stuff. **That's the translation of crucifixion into ordinary real life for the people.**

In other words, you behave like this, in this self-giving, open, sharing sort of a way, and the Jews are going to say you are crazy and so don't want you in the synagogue. The Romans are going to say we'd better get rid of you finally, and kick you right out of any political system. You'll be put **on the scrap heap**. And that's **the curse** as he sees it, and he says it's the only way of experiencing and tasting and really getting into yourself, **introjecting that whole experience of the cross** that we are talking about in Jesus. And it's that, that will be swallowed up and subsumed into the on-going resurrection mystery in you and me around here.

That's very, very heavy stuff – demanding stuff – but I think it's what he really means. And I think it was his little **encounter with the Galatians** and with **the Jews in Galatia** that really **brought it home to him** further than he had brought it home before.

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Two consequences. First, I wonder when exactly Paul wrote to the Galatians. I don't think it could be very early in his missionary work. It is too radical, too deep, it requires maturity in these strange experiences. Secondly, I wonder if what Paul wrote to the Galatians changes the focus of our reflection on church: it is no longer a sociological one, of externally describable membership, but rather a 'mystical' one, of membership in the ranks of the cursed-free who live outside the constraints of social belonging. Do we ever see all the 'Galatian-Christians' in any parish????

Relating this to **today**, we have people like **divorced Catholics who've re-married** and been denied access to the Eucharist, in present church discipline and practice. These people feel they have been kicked out. Somehow, Paul, if he met those people, would want to tell them that it's in the taste of that experience that they are actually freed from a lot, and that is the experience of **entering into and being included in the crucifixion/resurrection mystery**.

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It is interesting that nothing is said later about what happens to Galatian Christians. [John of Patmos, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, Polycarp of Smyrna never mention them, though they mention just about every other place in the area for a century and more.]

He stayed in Galatia for a time, and it does not seem to be part of a planned program. [Could he have been thinking of going north, to the shores of the Black Sea?] It was accidental, more of a stopover. It was because of some illness (weakness) that seems to have affected his sight. He fell ill in Galatia. Is this a recurrent illness (a thorn in the flesh)? It has been suggested that it may have been some form of malaria. He may have contracted it during his youth at Tarsus, due to the climate there: he may have preferred to go north to Galatia for the good of his health, rather than go with Barnabas to low-lying areas around the Mediterranean.... It is hard to know.

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## **TAKING GALATIANS INTO SECULAR LIFE TODAY**

The whole issue of Jewish law is very remote from us. No one urges Christians to be circumcised and to practice Torah today. What is **the 'law' that dominates people's lives now?** Is it a more mundane law, seeking to prove themselves in society by their achievements, their success, their prosperity? Much of what preachers call greed is bondage to this law. They work hard because it is their duty to succeed, they ought to, their failure is culpable. The tyranny of social expectations, and/or the hard necessities of survival, imposes a law that grips our existence so tightly as to make the constraints of Torah look like a holiday. Achievement at work runs into **limits and failure**; family relationships need to draw on an **infinite reserve of forgiveness**; the secular city can't survive without rethinking its basic claims and premises, **beyond the framework of any 'law'**. Then there is Paul's message to Galatia – freedom in failure, liberty where the going law denigrates us, a sense of the resurrected life at work in all of us. [J.S. O'Leary, Preaching Paul, The Furrow, January 2009]

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## **TAKING GALATIANS INTO PERSONAL LIFE TODAY**

Running through Paul's thought in Galatians is the question of our identity. Who are we? What makes us who we are? It is mix of memory (of earlier life), of personality (how we present to others now), or character (how we want to be consistent with ourselves in the future). Imagine someone who has been brainwashed. He has lost all idea of his past, his present, and his future. He has no idea who he is, no sense of identity. He does not even know what 'identity' means (it's a slippery term anyway). Imagine someone suffering from Alzheimer's...

Could it be that Paul sees the curse of the Law as doing to us what brainwashing and Alzheimer's do to people... Does that curse remove our identity (in the horizon of the Law)? Is that why it is a real curse? Do we still hang around, haunted by a set of social definitions that curses us for being who we are when – in those terms - we no longer have any sense of who we are?

What happens then? For Christians, according to Paul, there is the discovery that the risen Jesus has **a corporative identity**. This means that he **sweeps us up into his own identity**. This means that he lives **his story and his identity in us, as his own**. This means

that we live – having lost an independent sense of story and identity – in his. We find ourselves in him. We affect him. If we are presently cursed, he lives our curse....and our freedom.

Sometimes we hear someone say, 'I'm not Jesus, am I?' Yes, you are, and he is you. When every social system puts its curse on you... 'I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal 2,20)

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## HOW TO SUGGEST THIS NOW

Perhaps there might be some use in my re-saying the message of Galatians in a more direct way. I will use a sermon from one Good Friday afternoon.

### A sermon on Good Friday, 2008

St.Paul once wrote a letter to 'the Galatians'. He says things to them that might help us, this Good Friday afternoon, to see what the cross of Jesus is meant to be in our lives. Who were these Galatians? They had the same racial roots as the Irish. They were 'Gauls'. They had an undiluted sense of the real. They liked life raw. They wanted reality as it is. That is why they also had an unquenchable positivity. Paul thought Jesus was like them. Our challenge, like theirs, is to be real like Jesus. Through the realness of the cross.

Jesus was crucified. He was hung on a tree. The Jewish Law, the Torah, in the book of Deuteronomy, says that everyone who hangs on a tree is **cursed**. Cursed. Cursed by the Book. Cursed by the Law. Cursed by the God of the Book and the Law. Really, cursed by **public opinion**, by the 'common sense' of respectable ordinary people.

What does cursed mean? It means they have put the mocker on you. It means they have kicked you out. It means you are on the scrap heap. Ostracized. Eliminated. No one takes any notice of you any more. No one even notices you are (or aren't) there any more. No one talks to you or about you. You aren't there. Finished. Gone.

But if you aren't there, you are beyond the Law. Outside the three mile limit. Somewhere else. And so – **free!** No longer bound by the Law. Or by the book. Or by the God of the Law and the Book. Or by the Law, and the 'god,' of public opinion. Free from it all...Free.. really free.

When they rode **Jesus** out of town (Jerusalem) and nailed him to a cross outside the city walls, and printed their curse on him in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and wiped him off their books, and socially and really annihilated him, Jesus was somehow beyond all of them...free in a way they never knew.

Today, each of us can say, and pray, '**I believe in Jesus on the cross**'. What are we saying? 'I believe in a man who is cursed'. 'I believe in a man who is free'. 'I believe in

a man who is cursed by public opinion, by political correctness'. 'I believe in a man who found his freedom through all that, his freedom to be'. 'I want to share his curse, yes, I do, so I can share his freedom, yes, I want it'. I want to internalize the whole experience of his cross. That is what faith in Jesus really means. **Paul said so to the Galatians**. He said: 'I am crucified with Christ. I live now not with my own life, but with the life of the crucified Christ – he lives (his crucifiedness) in me.' (Gal 2, 20) To the Corinthians he said: 'we carry with us in our body the death-state of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus, too, may always be seen in our body. We are consigned to our death every day, for the sake of Jesus, so that in our mortal flesh the life of Jesus, too, may be openly shown'. (2 Cor 4,10-11) What he meant was, we are cursed by public opinion as Jesus was, we are regarded as worthless people, but we are free, free as he was, free to be, with him, with his free God. What he meant was, we share in his curse, so that his freedom can be real in us. We don't live their way, we live his way.

Perhaps we do not use the language, but we know the reality. **There is a crucifixion in the lives of ordinary people**. They are put out to dry by public opinion, and the 'way it goes'. They are given names, and the names are curses. And in it all, they find a freedom, and it is the freedom of the cross.

We are **baptized** catholics. We have been plunged into the water. Immersed in it. Immersed in his curse, immersed in his freedom.

If you are just a good respectable politically-correct catholic, you probably don't know what all this is about. Chances are your image of Jesus is that of someone who did the right public thing in his day, like that. Sorry: but Jesus was not like that. He wasn't a nice, respectable person like that. If he had been, he would not have had the curse put on him, he would not have been crucified. No: **he took them on**, he stood up for the orphan and the widow and the stranger in the land, he befriended the poor and impoverished, and told the management of Israel that they were wrong because they hurt the poor of God. That's why they cursed him, and hung him out on a cross. Like one more of the poor.

If **Western Christianity** today were like Jesus, it would be a threat to our western way of life. But don't worry, it isn't like Jesus. Our culture has tamed Christianity. Christianity has conformed to public opinion and the 'social right thing'. It goes along with the culture, when it gives tax breaks to the rich and subsidies to the oil companies, and cuts services to the poor. It blesses businesses that are motivated by profits, not service to others and betterment of life for everyone. It educates children to grow up and be capitalists. It isn't a Christian culture.

If there were enough Christians in the west who really lived their Christianity, there would be a serious threat to the prevailing culture, and **Christianity would probably be declared illegal**. It would be a danger to the economy, the politics, and the culture. The curse would be put on it. Perhaps then it might find its true freedom. Perhaps then it might begin to know Jesus, Jesus crucified. Who knows? A changed church might even transform our way of life. It might even change the value system. Staggering....and free.

Have you heard of **Abdul Rahman**? He is an Afghani. He was brought up as a Muslim. He went to live in Pakistan. There, sixteen years ago, he became a Christian. Recently, he returned to Afghanistan. He was arrested on arrival, and charged with apostasy, a crime which in Afghanistan is a capital offence. At his trial, he said he was willing to die for his faith (and there were people present who were ready to kill him for it). This was not a drama of religious toleration or freedom. It was a confrontation between the going culture and the most dangerous man it has ever heard about – Jesus of Nazareth. If found guilty Abdul would be sentenced to death. The curse would be on him. More than a thousand protesters gathered outside the courthouse, and threatened to kill him if he were released.

The western press was outraged. First, by the fact that someone might be put to death. Then by the fact that someone might be put on trial for personal religious faith. The west, and the U.S. in particular, put all sorts of pressure on Afghanistan to release him. The Afghani government is held up by U.S. military presence there. The court decided that Rahman was not mentally competent to stand trial. The court said Abdul was a mental case. They released him. He asked for asylum (in more senses than one) - in the west. He is now safe in Italy.

They said that about **Jesus**, too. But they didn't release him. They crucified him.

They don't say that about **us** Christians. We have turned Christian life into something quite reasonable and rational, respected by the going culture, and very sane. Without a cross.

I wonder what would happen if we became a bunch of mental cases and really lived out our Christian convictions? They probably wouldn't kill us, or put us in a psychiatric institution... They would just ignore us.... some Friday afternoon.

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## **AND SO?**

I think the 'rejected and so free' insight – paradoxical as it is – left Paul himself with a lot to ponder.

Nothing could be as it was before. A new image of 'being human' in relation to social boundaries, was needed. A new psychology of the 'self' in one's inner depths was needed too. I think he began to realize how much his life, and all our lives, was filled with self, was 'hell'-bent on the self's advancement, was making the self the center of the world. In a sense, we were all imprisoned in the prison of the self. We put excess value on it (even when we thought we were the most miserable of all people, and depreciated the self, and did our best to distract ourselves from our self). This is Qoheleth's vanity of the ego.

But what happens when, by exclusion from all definitions of social norms, there is no such 'self'?

I take it that Paul pursued this to the point where he could not, with any satisfaction, answer ‘an excluded and free’ self. What happens further to the self when it is so excluded and free? There are two provisory answers that Paul falls back on.

One is that if ‘I’ (the self) is no longer there, then ‘Christ lives in me’ (Gal 2,20). He does not mean that Christ lives in the self, as if the self is still there. He means, I think, that the Risen One replaces the whole self in him. He cannot from that moment try to be face to face with the self, because the self’s face is gone – he has lost all face in every human defintory system. He can only be flooded with the face of the Risen One.

The other provisory answer is **Agape, Love**. It is a word that is easy to use, and hard to discern. I don’t think Paul means some new experience of which his own self is the subject and source. I think it means that he no longer has any such experience, new or old, and all of that is replaced by an experience that permanently goes in the risen One – Agape. Agape is then an act of Jesus Risen as the Christ in Paul but not an act of Paul. What is that act, and what echoes or resonances does it create in Paul, he doesn’t yet know. For that, we need to look at his letter to the Romans.

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*Cf. Nathalie Sarthou-Lajus, Actualite del’apotre Paul, Etudes- Revue de culture contemporaine, Dec. 2008*

*Cf. Richard Hays, The story of God’s Son: the identity of Jesus in the letters of Paul, in Seeking the Identity of Jesus, ed. Beverly Gaventa and Richard Hayes, Princeton, Center of Theological Inquiry, 2008*

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