

## Reflection for Pentecost 2 by Megan Cambridge

Growing up isn't easy. Ideally, over time, and with lots of nurturing and correction, a child develops a value system, a moral compass, a sense of right and wrong. For this to be successful there must be a great deal support from family members, teachers and others, firm guidance and loving discipline. In our passage from Galatians for today Paul employs the metaphor of "growing up" to describe the new life in Christ compared to the old life subject to the Law, the Torah, of Israel.

Being only a short passage, our reading from the epistle misses some of the earlier lead up and explanation to what Paul is saying and you might want to read more. Paul talks about 3 covenants. The first is the Abrahamic covenant which we read about in Genesis chapter 15.

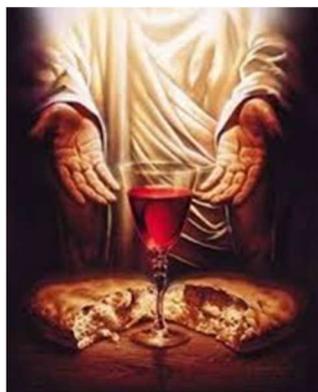


It is a unilateral/unconditional covenant in which only God states what He will do. Unlike most covenants, where both parties state their intention or obligation, Abraham doesn't have to promise anything. He trusts God, he has faith in Yahweh. God's covenant with Abraham is based on faith.

Then Paul references the Mosaic or Sinaitic (after Mount Sinai) Covenant; the Law. This is a covenant in the more traditional sense. Through the law (the Tora) Israel will have safety and security conditional on obedience (Exodus 19: 5-8). This is a conditional covenant providing direction and

restraint. It prescribed the way a mature child should behave but it could not give Israel a new heart. The law instructed the youthful Israel how to live a life of faith in the merciful promises of God but the response was, by and large, adolescent rebellion. Israel, for the most part, did not 'humble themselves'. As a result, the law exposed Israel's sin and 'held them under restraint until the day when God would give them a heart to trust him'. (Jeremiah 24:7).

Finally, Paul speaks of the coming of the New Covenant the one prophesied in Jeremiah (31:31-32)



"The days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors

when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the Lord.'

Paul insists that the new age of faithfulness has dawned in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. God's Law may have guided the people through the age preceding Christ but it is now only through faith in the risen Christ that they (and we) become rightly related to God and to others in the manner God intended from the time of Abraham. This new covenant is an unconditional covenant based on faith

(just like that with Abraham). The punishment for breaking the Law is borne by Christ and we are free.

According to the Law blood sacrifices were required and Christ came as the ultimate blood sacrifice once, for all and not just for the Jews. Paul argues that God has done an entirely new thing in Jesus Christ. God has revealed in Jesus the faithfulness He desires. All of God's children may relate to Him directly through the Spirit not through the Law.

Paul addresses his letter "to the churches of Galatia." Who were these churches? Galatia cuts a swath through the centre of Asia Minor (in modern day Turkey). Paul had travelled there founding several churches. He now sees the work he had done in these congregations under threat because of the challenge to his Gospel made by Jewish Christian Missionaries who wanted Gentile converts to keep some of the Law. Paul sees this a betrayal of the Gospel as he sees the Law is no longer necessary. Remember Paul was formerly a Pharisee, the most conservative of the parties within Judaism, and by his own admission "zealous for the Law" and a persecutor of the church before his conversion. Now, Paul is saying that keeping the Law is no longer necessary. Paul says that God put the Law in place on a temporary basis. "Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that

we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.”

In the Letter to the Galatians Paul argues that the new thing God has done in Jesus Christ (the new covenant) has freed Jesus’s followers from what he calls “the tyranny of the Law.” He says that before faith in Jesus arrived, we were imprisoned and guarded until we “grew up” sufficiently. Paul believed, now that Jesus had come, the tutorial (the law) was no longer needed, since those in Christ have grown up and are now free from the Law.

When the law was preached, it met with very little faith but when the Gospel is preached, many believe and are saved and the movement spread around the world. The reason why the law mostly shuts people up in sin, while the Gospel wins faith from large numbers, is that the preaching of the Gospel is accompanied by the work of the Holy Spirit to open the hearts of the listeners. "Faith has come" and God is fulfilling the promise to give new hearts and all of us here, who live by faith in Jesus, are living evidence that by the sovereign, effectual grace of the Holy Spirit "**faith has come**" even to us, taken up residence in our hearts and made us new.

Paul is very clear that faith in Christ so unites us to him that all the benefits He can give become ours. To belong to Christ is to be a child of God with all the privileges implied in that relationship. Paul is clear that this new life in Christ has practical and ethical implications. “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 and 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.”

Galatians raises perennial issues for the church about the limits of human freedom and the breadth of divine grace. Every generation of Christians asks, “What is required of us?” In Galatians we have Paul’s breath-taking assurance of God’s amazing grace that expects much but requires little for human salvation.

We can see the important social signifiers of Paul’s day, such as Jew and Gentile and slave and free, male and female. Writing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Paul might well reference native born or illegal immigrant, monied or working class or poor, people of colour or no colour, SNP or conservative or Labour or Liberal etc and yes male and female. Paul says Christ alone matters. Our own racial, social, political and sexual status does not make us any more or less than child and heir.

If, as Christians, we still align to our respective silos over doctrine and social policies, where we don’t get an opportunity to know and love each other and hear each other’s point of view Paul would say we have not ‘grown up’ into the freedom into which Christ has set us free. As grown-ups we should transcend tribalism and identification and mistrust of the “Other”. This isn’t ancient history confined to the time of Paul’s epistle; we still see the demonising of the ‘Other’ in mass persecutions and slaughter of minority groups around the world. We are seeing it now in the response to migrants and refugees in Europe, and, sadly, here at home. The world needs grown-ups, who can look beyond the tribal human distinctions of “not our kind” to find the common humanity that is in all God’s children. As Christians, as the church we say, and I believe we mean, that everyone is welcome here, but is it completely true? It’s a perception, but it is an immaculate perception? We should be here to show the world how different people can live in community together despite their differences and it should be our prayer and hope. We are all utterly dependent on Christ, not the value of our distinctions. As The hymn says:

Let us build a house where love can dwell  
and all can safely live,  
a place where saints and children tell  
how hearts learn to forgive;  
built of hopes and dreams and visions,  
rock of faith and vault of grace;  
here the love of Christ shall end divisions:  
All are welcome,  
all are welcome,  
all are welcome in this place. **Amen**