



GALATIANS

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

by Kathryn A. Kleinhans

Session one *No other gospel*

Text

Galatians 1:1–2:21

Theme verse

“Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law” (Galatians 2:16).

Opening hymn

Lord, Let My Heart Be Good Soil, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 512, or Almighty God, Your Word Is Cast, *Lutheran Book of Worship* 234

Opening prayer

Gracious God, open our minds and our hearts to your Word so we may learn together and grow in faith. Open our mouths to your Word so we may share the Good News of Jesus Christ with everyone we meet. Open our arms to your Word so we may show our faith through our actions. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Introduction

Paul’s letter to the Galatians was probably written between 50 and 55 A.D. Paul had only been to the region of Galatia once when he founded the churches there.

Sometime after Paul’s departure, some conservative Jewish Christians came to Galatia, insisting that the Gentile Christians living there needed more than faith in Jesus Christ; they also needed to obey Jewish law in order to be confident of God’s grace. Paul’s letter is written not only to defend his ministry among the Galatians, but also to assure them that they have received the grace of God through faith in Christ; nothing else is necessary!

Martin Luther called Paul’s letter to the Galatians “my Katie von Bora.” Paul’s conviction that we are justified (made right with God) by grace through faith in Christ is central to Luther’s theology, so it makes sense that he would think of this New Testament letter with the same intimacy and affection he felt for his wife. As we begin this 500th anniversary year of the start of the Reformation, we will study Galatians in conversation with Luther, who was a biblical scholar as well as a church reformer.

Why Paul writes to the churches in Galatia (Galatians 1:1–10)

Paul’s relationship with the Galatians

It’s easy to skip over or read quickly through the introductory verses of New Testament letters. Let’s look carefully at Galatians 1:1–5.

1. How does Paul describe himself?
2. How does Paul describe those whom he is addressing?
3. What does Paul say about God?

**LISTEN WHILE SOMEONE READS
VERSES 1–5 ALOUD.**

- 4. What words catch your attention? [Share with your neighbor or in small groups what words stood out for you and why.]**

“Grace” was a typical Greek greeting. “Peace” was a typical Hebrew greeting. By using both of these terms together (v. 3), Paul suggests a single community in which Gentiles (non-Jews) and Jews together are part of the same family of God.

In his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther reflects on the simple phrase “who gave himself for our sins” (v. 4). First, Luther emphasizes the verb “gave.” Jesus is giver, not demander or judge. And what does Jesus give? Not a new law, but the gift of himself!

Next Luther emphasizes the pronoun “our.” It’s not enough just to say that Jesus gave himself for the sins of the whole world. That’s true, but it doesn’t go far enough. For Luther, this message—this gift—is very personal. Jesus gave himself for “our” sins—for yours and for mine. In the context of the letter, Paul’s “our” includes himself along with the Galatians. They—we!—are all in this together as recipients of God’s grace and peace through Jesus Christ.

What’s the problem?

**LISTEN WHILE SOMEONE READS
VERSES 6–10 ALOUD.**

- 5. Paul opens his letter to the Galatians so graciously in verses 1–5, and then he challenges the Galatians strongly in verses 6–10. Why do you think Paul’s tone changes so abruptly? How would you describe Paul’s emotions?**
- 6. What main point is Paul trying to get across?**

Paul says the Galatians are turning “to a different gospel” because of the influence of people who are proclaiming a different message about Christ than the message that Paul proclaimed to them. In Galatians 2:1–14, it becomes clear that the issue is whether or not Gentile Christians need to be circumcised. Scholars believe that after Paul

left Galatia, some conservative Jewish Christians came into the area and told the Galatians, who were Gentile, that Paul had taught them “the truth,” but not “the whole truth.” They suggested that Paul’s understanding of the gospel was incomplete because Paul had not known Jesus during his earthly ministry. These newcomers claimed to know “the whole truth,” which included the importance of all Christians following Jewish law.

Look again at verses 6–10, paying attention to how Paul uses the word “gospel.”

- 7. Why do you think Paul says the Galatians are “turning to a different gospel” and then says immediately that there isn’t “another gospel” at all?**

The word “gospel” literally means “good news.” In these verses, Paul uses the word “gospel” both in a specific sense and in a general sense. In verse 7, Paul uses the definite article “the” to refer specifically to “the gospel of Christ.” Elsewhere in this passage he uses other words: “a different gospel,” “another gospel,” “a gospel contrary.” When we remember the literal meaning of the word, it’s easy to see that Paul is here contrasting the good news of Jesus Christ with other messages that claim to offer good news but don’t live up to their promises.

This is very similar to the way Luther talks about God in *The Large Catechism*. In his explanation to the first commandment, Luther defines “a god” as whatever we put our faith in and expect good from. This can be anything: money, fame, family, etc. But when you trust something other than the true God, you have really put your faith in an idol, “another gospel,” a false god that can only let you down.

In 1:8–9, Paul describes those who teach or believe a different “gospel” as being under a curse. Paul isn’t simply swearing or writing off those with different beliefs. He is attempting to help the Galatians understand the seriousness of their spiritual situation. As a result of the gospel he proclaimed to them, the Galatians had been living “in the grace of Christ” (v. 6). But if they turn away from that promise and think they must follow Jewish law to be in a right relationship with God, they are leaving the life

of grace and exchanging it for a cursed life. Why would people who have experienced grace and peace from God (v. 3) ever give that up?! For Paul, this is a matter of life or death: Either they trust the gift of Jesus as the sole source of their life and freedom (v. 4), or they trust in something else.

It's important to point out that Paul is not saying that the law is bad. After all, the law was given by God! What he is saying is that obedience to the law is no longer necessary for those who trust in Christ. This is a theme Paul (and we!) will explore more in Galatians 3.

The validity of Paul's ministry (Galatians 1:11–2:14)

If the letter to the Galatians were a court case, this section of the letter would be Paul's opening statement to the jury. He lays out the facts of the case as he understands them. These facts have to do with his call from God to witness to Jesus Christ, the relationship between Paul's witness to the Gentiles and the witness to the Jews and the role of the law for those who trust in Christ. Just as lawyers hope their opening and closing statements will help the jury interpret the facts their way, so Paul hopes that his narrative will persuade the Galatians that his previous teachings are valid.

Paul's authority comes from God

LOOK CLOSELY AT GALATIANS 1:11–17.

- 8. What source of authority does Paul say he relies on for his ministry and witness? Why is this important?**
- 9. How did God change Paul's life?**

Often we talk about the “conversion” of Paul, but Paul does not describe a conversion from one religion to another, from Judaism to Christianity. Instead Paul talks about being “called” by God through a revelation of Jesus Christ. Paul's experience is actually the opposite of a conversion. Before Christ was revealed to him, Paul persecuted Christians because he thought they practiced a different religion from Judaism, a false religion. Through a revelation from God, he comes to recognize Jesus as the

Messiah, the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Paul doesn't stop being Jewish in order to become a Christian; instead he becomes a Jewish Christian who now believes in Jesus Christ as God's self-revelation.

In terms of what Paul does with this new belief, we can say that Paul experiences his call to faith in Christ also as a call to be a missionary to the Gentiles.

LOOK CLOSELY AT GALATIANS 1:17–2:2.

- 10. Why do you think Paul emphasizes the time he spent away from Jerusalem?**

Remember that Paul is arguing against conservative Jewish Christians who say that Paul doesn't have a complete understanding of the gospel because he didn't know Jesus personally, as the Jerusalem disciples did. This might be true if Paul had been taught the Christian message by the Jerusalem disciples and hadn't learned it well enough. However, Paul's understanding of the gospel comes directly from God, by divine revelation. Paul reports his history and travels in detail to make it clear that his ministry is not secondhand or incomplete. Because Paul's call comes from God, the Galatians can trust that the message Paul preaches is true and complete.

Paul's ministry among the Gentiles had been accepted by Jewish Christian leaders

READ GALATIANS 2:1–10.

(OPTIONAL: READ ACTS 15:1–12)

Acts 15:1–12 gives an account of a meeting known as “the council of Jerusalem.” The presenting issue is whether or not Gentile believers need to be circumcised, as Jewish believers are. In Galatians 2:1–10, Paul provides another account of this same meeting. He uses the Greek convert Titus as an example of the validity of his witness to the Gentiles. If the leaders of the Jerusalem church did not accept Paul's missionary activity among the Gentiles, they would have required Titus to be circumcised to complete the work Paul had begun. Instead, they “recognized” (2:9) Paul's ministry and agreed that Paul should continue his

work among the Gentiles without requiring circumcision.

The concern is much more than just the physical act of circumcision. Since Abraham, circumcision had been a sign of the covenant God made with God's chosen people. But now Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians both receive the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ—a new covenant! What is really at stake is how these two Christian communities—Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians—will now relate to each other.

Paul's report of this meeting concludes with: "They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor" (Galatians 2:10). "Remember the poor" is not just a general ethical principle. It referred specifically to a collection for the Jewish Christian community in Jerusalem that Titus had been organizing among Gentile Christian communities. (Guidelines for this collection are recorded in 1 Corinthians 16:1–4.) In this context, "remembering the poor" is a very concrete way of demonstrating the relationship between these two groups of Christians.

Both Acts 15 and Galatians 2 conclude that Peter and Paul have the same ministry: preaching the good news of Jesus Christ. But they have different audiences. Peter and the other disciples preach the gospel primarily to Jews, while Paul and his companions preach the gospel to Gentiles. We might think of this a bit like a congregation that offers worship services in different languages to serve different populations: perhaps English and Spanish, perhaps English and Oromo (one of the languages of Ethiopia). Believers from both groups share the same Christian faith and are members of the same body of Christ. But there are linguistic and cultural reasons to provide distinct ministries in each community. That's what was going on in the early years of the Christian church.

The council of Jerusalem had recognized two culturally distinct forms of Christian life and witness. Jewish Christians were free to continue to observe the law although their relationship with God was now defined by the new covenant of faith in Christ. Gentile Christians were free to participate in this new covenant of faith without needing to "backtrack" and adopt the rituals of the old covenant. When Paul writes, "I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had

been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised" (2:7), he does not mean that there are two different gospels, but rather that the gospel could be lived out differently in two culturally distinct communities. (Some older translations say "the gospel of circumcision" instead of "the gospel for the circumcised." That language is not helpful, because it suggests that there are two different gospels—the very point that Paul rejected in chapter 1!)

Apparently things had deteriorated by the time Paul wrote to the Galatians a few years later.

The conservative Jewish Christians who came to Galatia in Paul's absence recognized the Galatians' faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of Israel, but claimed that their faith was incomplete without adherence to the law; faith alone wasn't enough to be accepted as a member of God's people. It's as if we told the Ethiopian Christians they weren't "fully" Christian until they worshipped in English. Or as if we told all Lutherans that faith in Jesus is essential, but also they have to speak German and eat German food and adopt German customs, as the first Lutherans did.

LISTEN WHILE SOMEONE READS GALATIANS 2:11–14 ALOUD.

11. Why did Peter stop eating with Gentiles?

Paul points to Titus not needing to be circumcised as evidence that Gentile Christians do not need to observe the Jewish law. Now Paul also points to Peter violating kosher food practices by eating with Gentiles as evidence that even for Jewish Christians like himself, the law is no longer necessary. But Peter's behavior illustrates both Paul's point and a problem. Peter felt free to eat and interact with Gentile Christians who did not observe the rituals of the law—until other Jewish Christians saw him. In short, he gave in to peer pressure.

This is the issue the Galatians are wrestling with now: Will they give in to the pressure of those who want them to conform to Jewish law, or will they trust the truth of the gospel as they received it from Paul?

Application

12. Have you ever experienced church conflict? Have you ever felt pressured to compromise your beliefs for the sake of others?
13. How did you address each other during times of conflict? How did you talk about God during times of conflict? Compare especially with Paul's opening language in Galatians 1:1–5.
14. What do you think Paul would say or write to your congregation?

Faith alone in Christ alone (Galatians 2:15–21)

In this passage, Paul moves beyond the discussion of church conflict to make a clear statement of the heart of the gospel: “...we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (v. 16). In his 1535 commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther wrote, “This is the chief doctrine of the Christian faith... For in it are included all the other doctrines of our faith” (*Luther's Works* 26:282, 283). “If we lose the doctrine of justification,” Luther insisted, “we lose simply everything” (*LW* 26:25).

Gospel-plus is no gospel at all

LISTEN WHILE SOMEONE READS GALATIANS 2:15–21 ALOUD.

15. What words or phrases in this passage caught your attention? What images did the passage bring to mind? How did it make you feel? [Share your responses with your neighbor or in small groups.]

Paul's opponents had implied that Paul's understanding of the gospel was incomplete; they required observance of Jewish law in addition to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. Paul turns that position on its head. It's not that Paul has an incomplete understanding of the Gospel, but rather that his opponents are requiring something else in addition to the gospel. If even Jewish Christians like Paul understand that “a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (v. 15), then requiring Gentile Christians to observe Jewish law makes no sense at all (v. 14).

One way of thinking about this problem is with the

simple phrase “gospel plus.” Whenever someone attempts to add requirements to the gospel of God's unconditional grace through faith in Jesus Christ, there's a problem. Attempting to add something to the gospel (“gospel-plus”) actually subtracts from the good news. The new requirements become “a different gospel,” as Paul warned against (verses 6–7).

Martin Luther shared this concern, based on his own experience. In Luther's day, the issue was not circumcision and adherence to Jewish law but fasting, penance and other church regulations. One of the common theologies of the day explained that “God will not deny grace to those who do what is in them.” In other words, you need to do everything you can, and then God's grace will complete what you are still lacking to be perfect in God's sight. But this led Luther—and those to whom he ministered—into a vicious circle of never feeling you have done enough.

Through his study of the Scriptures, Luther came to understand that we are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Luther's use of “alone” stands in sharp contrast to a “gospel-plus” approach. God's grace is given as a gift, without our cooperation (grace “plus” human ability). Faith receives Christ as a gift, without our needing to do something to earn God's favor or prove our sincerity (faith “plus” works). Luther wrote in his commentary on Galatians:

For the Law is a taskmaster; it demands that we work and that we give. In short, it wants to have something from us. The Gospel, on the contrary, does not demand; it grants freely; it commands us to hold out our hands and to receive what is being offered (*LW* 26:208).

Application

16. Have you ever heard some Christians claiming that others are not really or fully Christian because of something they do or fail to do? How did you respond?
17. Both Paul and Luther challenge the common understanding that we need something other than faith in order to be made right with God. Can you think of things that Christians today want to rely on instead of or in addition to grace?

The intimacy of faith

Martin Luther's discussion of these verses (15–21) becomes increasingly intimate. He begins by describing how faith holds onto Christ as a ring holds a gemstone. Then he describes how Christ works in him. He concludes by describing the relationship between Christ and the believer as “one flesh and one bone” (alluding to Genesis 2), finally saying, “in such a way that this faith couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife” (*LW* 26:168).

18. How does it make you feel to think of your relationship with Christ in this way?
19. Reflecting on what you have learned, identify one idea to take with you to strengthen your faith during the coming month.

Closing prayer

“Loving God, by tender words and covenant promise you have joined us to yourself forever, and you invite us to respond to your love with faithfulness. By your Spirit may we live with you and with one another in justice, mercy, and joy, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen”

(*ELW*, Prayer for the Eighth Sunday after Epiphany, Year B, page 25).

Closing hymn

Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word, *ELW* 517 🌿

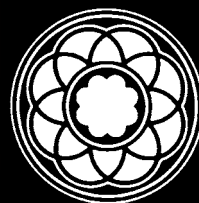
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Session one *No other gospel*

Materials needed

Bibles for participants (NRSV preferred). Hymnals to either read or sing the suggested hymns. Newsprint and markers for the optional activity described below. A map including Asia Minor (contemporary Turkey), Palestine, Syria and Arabia.

Session goals

- To understand the context of Paul's letter and the relationship between Paul and the Christians in Galatia
- To gain a clearer understanding of faith alone in Christ alone as the heart of the gospel
- To understand the gospel as the source of authority for the church
- To reflect on why legalism (requiring something more than the gospel) is such a temptation and a threat to the church

Bible study approach

The ELCA's Book of Faith initiative encourages studying the Scriptures through four lenses:

The **historical lens** calls our attention to the context in which a scriptural passage was written. Understanding what a passage meant to its original readers or hearers helps us to explore what that text might mean for us today. In this study, our historical lens will also include

the 16th century as we consider some of Martin Luther's insights into Paul's letter to the Galatians.

The **literary lens** focuses on the language and structure of the text. The Scriptures contain many different kinds of writing. How we read a scriptural passage is shaped by whether the text is a letter, a narrative, a poem, a collection of laws or some other kind of writing. The literary lens also considers how specific word choices or images in the text can inform our understanding.

The **theological lens** focuses our reading on the centrality of the Gospel, the good news of God's grace for us through faith in Jesus Christ. We read the Scriptures asking how the text can point us to Christ. Since this is the main point of Paul's letter to the Galatians, we can expect to see this theological emphasis repeated throughout our study.

The **devotional lens** focuses on how the text speaks to and shapes my faith. We believe that the Holy Spirit works through the words of the Scriptures to speak to us here and now. While we often focus on the individual use of the devotional lens, in this study we will also use the devotional lens communally, to consider the implications and applications of the text for the Christian communities to which we belong.

Optional activity related to Galatians 1:11–2:14

The timeline and itinerary that Paul describes in Galatians 1 differ from what is recorded in Acts 9. If you have time, divide participants into two groups. Have one group draw a timeline of Paul's movement according to Galatians 1:13–2:2. Have the other group draw a timeline of Paul's movement according to Acts 9:1–30. (If you have a

large number of participants, you can divide them into an even number of groups with half of the groups working on each of the two passages.)

Have the groups compare their timelines and discuss the differences. For example:

- Acts 9 reports that Jesus reveals himself to Paul while Paul is traveling to Damascus (Acts 9:3). Paul then goes from Damascus to Jerusalem (v. 26), where he is introduced to the apostles by Barnabas (v. 27). Next he is taken to Caesarea and sent to Tarsus (v. 30).
- In Galatians 1, Paul reports that after he receives a revelation of Christ, he goes immediately to Arabia and then returns to Damascus. He does not go to Jerusalem for three years, and when he does, he only meets Cephas (Peter) and James. His trip to Jerusalem with Barnabas takes place another 14 years later.

Here is another difference: According to Galatians 2:2, Paul had only a private meeting with the Christian leaders in Jerusalem. However, Acts reports that Paul witnessed publicly to Christ in Jerusalem—so boldly that people wanted to kill him, and he had to leave town (9:28–30).

How important are these differences? Remember that the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life and ministry also have

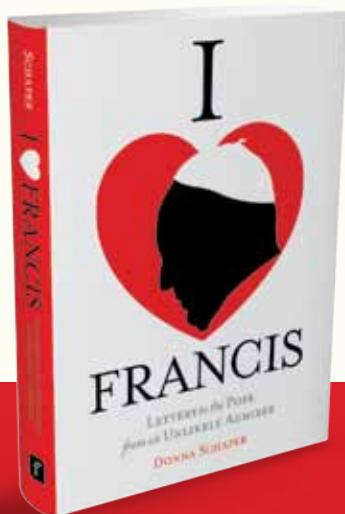
differences in how they report the same events. For some Christians, these differences are a problem. Martin Luther disagrees. In his commentary on Galatians, Luther writes:

The histories in the Scriptures are often concise and confused, so that they cannot be easily harmonized, as, for example, the denials of Peter and the history of Christ's Passion, etc. Thus Paul is not reciting the entire history here. Therefore I do not expend any labor or concern on harmonizing these things, but here I pay attention only to Paul's purpose and intention (*LW* 26:61).

Paul's intention is not to provide a precise timetable but to establish that his preaching of the gospel did not depend on authorization from the apostles in Jerusalem; his authorization came from God, and he began his ministry of evangelism as soon as he received the revelation from God. From a literary perspective, we could say that Paul shapes how he tells his life story to suit his audience and purpose. Using other lenses, we might say that the historical accuracy of this particular passage is less important to Luther than the theological point.

Looking ahead

Let participants know that we will look at Galatians 2:19–21 again at the beginning of session two.



A Baptist pastor voices her love and quarrels with the Bishop of Rome

Pastor Donna Schaper says Pope Francis is a pope for all of us, and she has written him a series of letters—love letters, of a sort. She agrees with him on climate change and concern for the poor. But she fights with him on the issues of women's ordination and LGBT rights. However, Pastor Donna believes that Pope Francis can heal the church and calls us all to join him in loving the world.

"Every Christian needs to eavesdrop on this conversation, whether they heart Francis or not." —**Scott Thumma, dean of Hartford Seminary**

I Heart Francis: Letters to the Pope from an Unlikely Admirer

By Donna Schaper

NOW AVAILABLE





GALATIANS

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

by Kathryn A. Kleinhans

Session two

Children of God through faith

Text

GALATIANS 2:19–3:29

Theme verses

“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. 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 3:25–29).

Opening hymn

The God of Abraham Praise, stanzas 1–4 *ELW* 831 or Blessed Be the God of Israel *ELW* 250

Opening prayer

Gracious and holy God, give us diligence to seek you, wisdom to perceive you, and patience to wait for you. Grant us, O God, a mind to meditate on you; eyes to behold you; ears to listen for your word; a heart to love you; and a life to proclaim you; through the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

(*ELW*, Prayer for those seeking deeper knowledge of God, page 76)

Introduction

In the first two chapters of Galatians, Paul gave a clear statement of the good news of justification by grace through faith. Although the Galatians had heard the gospel from Paul before, they were being challenged by Jewish Christians who insisted they also needed to obey the law. Paul pointed to the revelation of Jesus Christ that he had received as the authority for his ministry and his message in order to encourage the Galatians to trust the gospel they had first heard from him.

In chapter 3, Paul continues to make his case, drawing on the firsthand experience of the Galatians themselves as well as the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament). The Galatians are part of God’s family because of God’s promise, not because of whether or not they obey God’s law.

The lived experience of God’s gift of grace

GALATIANS 2:19–3:5

The intimacy of faith

READ GALATIANS 2:19–21 ALOUD.

1. What words or phrases in this passage caught your attention? What images did the passage bring to mind? How did it make you feel? [Share your responses with your neighbor or in small groups.]

In Galatians 2:20, Paul says that the Son of God “loved me and gave himself for me,” echoing the language he had used in 1:4, where he wrote that “the Lord Jesus Christ...gave himself for our sins to set us free...” In his commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther contrasts this emphasis on Christ

giving himself for us with the monks who “dream that they give themselves for Christ” (LW 26:172). Although we are not monks, Luther offers an important reminder that the primary direction of our relationship with God is God coming to us, not our reaching out to God.

God’s grace and the new life we have in Christ are gifts we receive rather than things we can earn or accomplish. Paul emphasizes the fact that this is all God’s action when he writes, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (verses 19–20). Luther makes the point this way: “For here we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God” (LW 26:4). Can you hear echoes of the ELCA tagline “God’s work. Our hands.” in Luther’s words?

2. How would you attempt to explain “justification by faith” to someone else? [Take a few minutes to talk about this in small groups.]
3. What does “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God” (v. 20) mean to you? How might this belief shape your daily living?

While Paul uses the personal pronoun “I” in this passage, he is not just speaking for himself; he is speaking for all Christians. He describes a personal, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ—so intimate that Paul can say his life is no longer his own. Jesus Christ is living in and through him! This is the same message of grace that Paul has previously preached to the Galatians. These words describe their lives, too, (and ours!) when they trust the gospel that Jesus Christ has given himself to and for them.

In the previous study, we noted that Luther used marriage imagery to emphasize the intimacy of this relationship. But Luther said this faith relationship with Christ is even “more intimate” than marriage.

According to Luther,

“...faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: ‘I am as Christ.’ And Christ, in turn, says: ‘I am as that sinner who is attached to Me, and I to

him. For by faith we are joined together into one flesh and one bone” (LW 26:168).

Wow! Christ and I are sharing the same life! Just as he shares my sinfulness, so I share his righteousness. Just as he shares my death, so I share his risen life.

This, both for Paul and for Luther, is why justification (being made right with God) happens through faith. Faith is not about having correct beliefs or being sincere. Faith justifies because it is through faith that we are united to Christ. Wow!

In Luther’s words,

“... faith justifies because it takes hold of and possesses this treasure, the present Christ...The Christ who is grasped by faith and who lives in the heart is the true Christian righteousness, on account of which God counts us righteous and grants us eternal life” (LW 26:130).

Too good to be true?

READ GALATIANS 3:1–5 ALOUD.

4. In the early church, letters were typically read aloud so that members of the community heard them rather than reading for themselves. How do you think you would respond to hearing these words addressed to you?

In these verses, Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions intended to bring the Galatians back to their senses. We can almost hear him saying, “Are you kidding me?!” Paul mentions three times that the Galatians have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. Therefore they should know, firsthand, in their own lives, that grace is a gift received through faith. They have already experienced it! If anything had been lacking, if the Galatians still needed to do something (“the works of the law”), God would not have sent the Holy Spirit to them. Since they have received the Holy Spirit, clearly nothing is lacking; faith alone is sufficient. According to Paul, if the Galatians listen to the “gospel-plus” message that they need to do more to complete their salvation, they are turning their backs on the great gift they have already received. “Then Christ died for nothing” (2:21).

5. Why do you think the Galatians are listening to the newcomers who are emphasizing the law?

Paul's opponents who are preaching "gospel plus law" and the Galatians themselves have different spiritual problems. Luther compares these conservative Jewish Christians to the workers who labor all day in the vineyard, only to see that those hired at the end of the day receive exactly the same payment (Matthew 20:1-16). From this perspective, it seems unfair that Gentile believers don't have to keep the same religious laws that their Jewish counterparts have been observing since even before the time of Christ.

But for the Gentile Christians, the problem posed by the preaching of "gospel plus law" is that it makes the good news that Paul preached sound too good to be true. Justification through faith alone? Gift with no strings attached? Our conscience and sense of self-reliance and self-worth rebel at the idea that there is nothing we can do, nothing we can contribute to our relationship with God. In his commentary on Galatians, Luther makes the point that it's a lot easier to *say* that we are justified by faith than it is really to believe it and live by it:

"It is easy to say that the Spirit is received solely by hearing with faith; but it is not so easy to hear, accept, believe, and keep as it is to speak of it. Therefore if you hear from me that Christ is the Lamb of God, sacrificed for your sins, see that you really listen to this. Paul purposely calls it 'the hearing of faith,' not 'the Word of faith' ... He means a Word that you believe when you hear it, so that the Word is not only the sound of my voice but is something that is heard by you, penetrates into your heart, and is believed by you. Then it is truly hearing with faith, through which you receive the Holy Spirit" (LW 26:215).

Abraham and faith
GALATIANS 3:6-14

Earlier Paul has made the case for justification by faith based on the Galatians' own experience of having received the Holy Spirit through faith. Now he makes an argument based on the Scriptures.

6. READ GENESIS 12:1-4. How do you think Abram (later renamed Abraham) understood God's promise that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (v. 3)? What might he have expected to happen?

7. READ GENESIS 15:1-6 AND GALATIANS 3:6-14. What elements from Abram's story in Genesis does Paul draw on in Galatians?

The Galatians are being tempted in the direction of legalism, the belief that righteousness requires observing the law. The book of Exodus tells the story of how God gave the law to Moses on Mount Sinai. By appealing all the way back to Abraham, Paul is, in a sense, going over Moses' head. As Paul will point out in Galatians 3:17, the law was given to Moses 430 years after God's covenant with Abraham. God's promise to bless Abraham and Abraham's faithful response comes first!

8. READ HABAKKUK 2:2-4 AND ROMANS 1:16-17. THEN REREAD GALATIANS 3:11. What similarities do you notice in these passages? Why do you think Paul quotes from Habakkuk in his letters?

Both the Hebrew and the Greek words translated as "righteous" in these verses can also be translated as "just." The word "righteous" typically refers to behavior according to a moral code. "Justice" carries the implication that people get (or should get) what they deserve. Both words put the focus on what we do. In contrast, these verses associate righteousness not with human behavior but with faith: trusting God.

Sometimes people think, mistakenly, that the Old Testament is all about law and obedience while the New Testament is all about grace and faith. Paul reminds his readers that the Old Testament (which he would have referred to as the Hebrew scriptures) is also rooted in faithful trust of God. Remember that Paul's opponents have told the Galatian Christians that they need to follow God's law. However Paul uses the example of Abraham and the words of the prophet Habakkuk to make the point that God considers faith, not obedience, as our righteousness.

This was a crucial insight for Martin Luther. In his early life as a monk, he felt that he could never live up to the demands of God's law; he could never be righteous, no matter how hard he tried. Through his study of the Scriptures, Luther came to share Paul's understanding and to see that righteousness is a gift God gives to us in Christ, not a performance standard that God demands of us.

9. LOOK AGAIN AT GALATIANS 3:14. How does Paul describe the way in which the Gentiles are blessed through Abraham?

In Genesis 12:3, God had promised Abraham that “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Paul is clear that this does not occur because non-Jews begin to observe the law but rather when they come to faith in Israel's promised Messiah, Jesus, and share in the same gift of the Spirit. Abraham and his descendants are blessed to be a blessing. God's chosen people, Israel, are not a model to be emulated but a channel through which God reaches the world. For Paul, the way Gentiles get in on God's blessing is not by doing what Jews do, but by trusting the God whom the Jews worship, a God now revealed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop N.T. Wright writes in his commentary on Galatians: “What then was God's original intention? That Abraham should have a single worldwide family, consisting of a group defined in terms not of parentage or ethnicity but of faith.”

Law and promise
GALATIANS 3:15–29

A promising God

10. Beginning with verse 14, count the number of times the word “promise” occurs in the rest of Galatians 3. [This can be done by having individuals read through the text quickly on their own or by having participants count while someone reads it aloud.] What is your emotional response to the repetition of this word? Why do you think Paul uses it so frequently?

The word “promise” appears 11 times in Paul's letter to the Galatians, nine of them in chapter 3 alone. It is obviously an important concept for Paul, and it also plays a central role in Lutheran thought. One of the Lutheran Confessional documents (the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, written in 1531) states that:

“All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises. In some places it communicates the law. In other places it communicates the promise concerning Christ, either when it promises that Christ will come and on account of him offers the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life, or when in the gospel itself, Christ, after he appeared, promises the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life” (Apology, Article IV).

The phrase “law and promise” adds an important emphasis to the more commonly heard phrase “law and gospel.” The word “promise” makes it clear that gospel is not simply about content: the story of Jesus. A promise is an interpersonal *communication*, and what it communicates is a *commitment*. Laws, by definition, require something from us, while a promise offers something to us. In Luther's words, “the Law demands: ‘Do this!’ The promise grants: ‘Accept this!’” (LW 26:303)

Of course, most of us have experience with broken promises. Sometimes others fail to keep their promises to us. Sometimes we are the ones who fail to keep the promises we have made. Maybe that's why the Galatians were tempted to think that the gospel they heard from Paul was too good to be true. Maybe we ourselves are even tempted sometimes not to trust but to think there's something we need to do to make God love us. In these “too good to be true” moments, Paul wants the Galatians—and us!—to trust that God is one who can and does keep promises!

In Galatians 3:15–18, Paul uses a will as an example of the lasting power of promises. The promises made in a will last even beyond death. Since God's covenant promise to Abraham was given long before Moses received the Law on Mount Sinai, our inheritance as daughters and sons of God surely comes through the promise, not through our obedience to the law. When Luther discusses

this metaphor, he points out that a will goes into effect only when the one making the last will and testament dies. God’s promise—to Abraham, Abraham’s descendants, the Galatians, and finally to us as we read this letter now—is guaranteed by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What about the Law?

GALATIANS 3:19–26

11. If participants have different translations of the Bible, ask them to read verses 24–25 aloud. List the words that are used for the noun that is translated “disciplinarian” in NRSV. [See box below.] Talk about the meaning suggested by these different words.

The Greek word used in verses 24–25, *paidagogos*, is related to our word “pedagogy”; however, it is not really about teaching. The *paidagogos* was not the teacher but the slave whose job was to take the child safely to and from school. We might think of this today as the role of a babysitter or nanny.

We noted in our first session that Paul is not saying that the law is bad. After all, the law was given by God! What he is saying is that obedience to the law is no longer necessary for those who trust in Christ. As Paul explains in chapter 3, the law served the purpose of guiding and guarding God’s chosen people until the fullness of time when God’s promised Messiah, Jesus, came. The law was necessary “because of transgressions” (verse 19). The promise had already been given, and God keeps God’s promises! But, in the meantime, the law helped regulate human behavior and limit sin. It was never God’s intention that the law would replace the promise as the way we are made righteous before God.

The community of promise

INVITE PARTICIPANTS TO CLOSE THEIR EYES WHILE GALATIANS 3:25–29 IS READ ALOUD.

12. What words or phrases in this passage caught your attention? What images did the passage bring to mind? How did it make you feel?

13. How does your congregation emphasize the centrality and unifying power of baptism?
14. How well does your congregation live out the unity-in-diversity that Paul describes?


We will spend more time examining this community of promise in our next session.

15. Reflecting on what you have learned, identify one image or idea to take with you to strength your faith during the coming month.

Closing prayer

Faithful God, we are created in your image and baptized in your name. Strengthen our trust in your promises, and empower us to live together with all of your children as members of your beloved community. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Closing hymn

Baptized in Water (*ELW* 456) or In Christ There Is No East or West (*ELW* 650) 

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Different translations of *paidagogos* in Galatians 3:24–25

(for use with question 11)

<i>Tutor</i>	ASV American Standard Version
<i>Teacher</i>	CEV Contemporary English Bible
<i>Schoolmaster</i>	KJV King James Version
<i>Master</i>	ICB International Children’s Bible
<i>Guardian</i>	NIV New International Version
<i>Governess</i>	JB Phillips New Testament
<i>Disciplinarian</i>	NRSV New Revised Standard Version
<i>Custodian</i>	CEB Common English Bible
<i>Child-conductor</i>	YLT Young’s Literal Translation



GALATIANS

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

by Kathryn A. Kleinhans

Session two

Children of God through faith

Session goals

- To recognize the significance of faith in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament
- To understand the interim role of God's Law and to rely on the Holy Spirit as the source and center of our Christian life
- To appreciate our new identity in Christ and, through Christ, our relationship with others

Materials needed

Hymnals, Bibles, and a large bowl of water for the optional closing activity.

Notes for this session

On the marriage imagery

The marriage imagery Luther uses may be uncomfortable for some participants for any number of reasons, including singleness, divorce, marital problems or the death of a spouse. This imagery is found in both the Old and New Testaments. However, the Scriptures also use other imagery to describe God's relationship with us: parent and child, mother hen protecting her chicks, etc.

It may also be helpful to mention that while scriptural imagery provides a familiar frame of reference, God always exceeds the reality of any comparison. Imagining Christ as spouse or God as Father can actually provide a positive alternative for those whose experience of earthly spouses or earthly parents has been negative or even absent.

On the Lutheran confessional writings

The Book of Concord contains a collection of confessions of faith written by the Lutheran reformers in the 16th century, along with the creeds of the early church (Apostles, Nicene and Athanasian). Lutheran pastors and lay leaders today promise to preach and teach in accordance with these Lutheran confessional writings.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession was written to defend the teachings contained in the Augsburg Confession. ("Apology" means defense, not feeling sorry about.) The quotation in this month's study is from the section of the Apology dealing with justification by faith. While there are 28 topical articles in the Augsburg Confession, one third of the Apology deals with a single article, Article IV, on justification by faith. The amount of space devoted to a defense of justification by faith is evidence of how central this teaching was in the 16th century dispute between the Lutheran reformers and the Catholic church.

In 1999, the Lutheran World Federation (to which the ELCA belongs) and the Vatican signed an agreement called "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification." The United Methodist Church later signed the Joint Declaration, too.

Optional closing activity

Invite participants to gather in a circle around a large bowl of water. Each woman should dip her fingers into the water, make the sign of the cross on the forehead of her neighbor or partner, and say, "In Christ Jesus you are a child of God through faith" (from Galatians 3:26). 🌸



GALATIANS

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

by Kathryn A. Kleinhans

Session three

Heirs of the promise

Text

GALATIANS 3:24-4:31

Theme verse

“And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Galatians 4:6)

Opening hymn

“Children of the Heavenly Father” (*ELW* 781)

Opening prayer

Loving God, in calling us to yourself in love, you draw us closer to each other. Open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to others that we may learn and grow together. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Introduction

In the first two chapters of Galatians, Paul gave a clear statement of the good news of justification by grace through faith. Although the Galatians had heard the gospel from Paul before, they were being challenged by Jewish Christians who insisted they also needed to obey the Law in order to be in a right relationship with God.

In chapter 3, Paul drew on the firsthand experience of the Galatians themselves as well as the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament) to make the case that the Galatians are part of God’s family because of God’s gift and promise, not because of whether or not they obey God’s law. In chapter 4, he continues to reinforce this understanding.

The family of faith

READ GALATIANS 3:24–4:7 ALOUD. Pause after each sentence or verse, and identify all the words Paul uses that are related to family. After you have finished reading:

1. Why do you think Paul uses so much family language in this passage?

Given, not chosen

For Paul, Jesus Christ is both the cause and the center of our family relationship with God. Jesus is the Son of God. Because we Christians have been united with Christ in baptism, we also receive the status of being sons and daughters of God through adoption. We can call upon God with trust as our “Abba! Father!”

Parents who have adopted children are often quite insistent in saying, “This is my child, not my ‘adopted child.’” Adoption, like birth, describes the process by which someone came to be a part of the family in the first place. But once one is a member of the family, one belongs, regardless of how one entered it.

Martin Luther uses this language of being children of God to reinforce how God’s promise does not depend on what we do. Neither in birth nor in adoption does the child him- or herself play an active role. We don’t choose to be born. We don’t choose the family we are born into. In adoption, it is the parent rather than the child who chooses. So it is with God and us. We are members of God’s family by God’s choice, not our own.

2. How does it feel to think of yourself as a daughter of God?
How does it feel to think of yourself as a sister of Jesus Christ?

3. **How does it feel to think of the other members of your congregation as sisters and brothers of Jesus Christ—and therefore sisters and brothers of yours? Take time to think about specific people in your congregation whom you know and like, people you don't know well and even people you might not like. How might taking these family relationships seriously shape the ways we relate to each other, especially in times of disagreement?**

In Galatians 3, Paul used the metaphor of a will to describe the unbreakable nature of God's promise, which is guaranteed even after death. In Galatians 4, Paul picks up on this concept with the language of guardianship. While a will makes arrangements for the disposition of property, guardianship is arranged to provide for the care and raising of one's minor children. The will confirms God's promise to us, while the guardian (like the *paidagogos* or "disciplinarian" in 3:24) fulfills a temporary, practical function. Our family status, however, is lifelong.

There's also another dimension to this. Just as none of us chooses our own parents, we also do not choose our siblings. Because of who my parents are, I am by default related to my parents' other children. So it is in the family of Christ. Baptism not only makes us children of God but also makes us sisters and brothers of each other—whether we like it or not.

A diverse family

Galatians 4:6 includes the word "father" in two different languages. "Abba" is the Aramaic word for father. (Aramaic, not Hebrew, was the common spoken language of the Jewish people in the first century.) It was not a formal title but an intimate term, like "Dad." Our English translation retains the Aramaic word because the original Greek text also included the Aramaic word.

4. **Why do you think it was important for Paul to write the word "father" in two different languages in this letter?**

In our first session, we described the multicultural nature of the early church, in which both Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians are part of the same community of believers. Luther believed that the use of both lan-

guages in this passage was an intentional reminder of this multicultural reality of the Christian church. As Luther wrote, "Paul purposely wanted to use both because of the twofold nature of the church as gathered from Gentiles and Jews; and that Gentiles and Jews do indeed call God 'Father' in different languages, but the cry of both is the same, since both cry: 'Father!'" (*LW* 26:389).

READ GALATIANS 3:28 AGAIN.

When the ELCA was formed in 1988, we set a goal that within ten years our membership would be ten percent "persons of color and/or persons whose primary language is other than English." We did this recognizing that God was calling us beyond the Lutheran church's traditional Euro-centric heritage, calling us to form a new church that was more representative of our diverse society. After all, Jesus sent the disciples to witness to all nations and peoples, not just to those who were like them.

Yet according to a 2014 study by Pew Research, the ELCA remains 96 percent white—the whitest of the 29 groups included in the study. According to the same study, the adult population of the U.S. is only 66 percent white.

5. **Why do you think the ELCA as a whole is so much less diverse than our nation? Is this a problem? Why or why not?**
6. **What kinds of diversity are present in your congregation? In your community? How representative is your congregation of the wider community? Can you think of specific things you and your congregation might do to become more inviting and welcoming of others, especially those who differ from you?**

God's response to our need

READ GALATIANS 4:4-7 AGAIN.

Note the parallel actions Paul describes. Paul tells us first that "God sent his Son" (v. 4) and then that "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts" (v. 6).

Note the parallel consequences Paul describes. Because of God's action we are redeemed from the law and adopted as God's own children (v. 5). And because we have become God's children, we have also become

heirs of God, inheritors of all God's promises (v. 7). There is nothing we can do. God does it all.

Paul emphasizes the uniqueness of God's act of self-giving, which took place when Jesus was born "in the fullness of time" (v. 4). Martin Luther in his commentary on Galatians emphasizes the continuing impact of God's act of self-giving. According to Luther, "that same Christ who once came in time comes to us in spirit every day and every hour" (LW 26:360). Luther then uses these verses as a foundation for pastoral care.

READ ROMANS 8:14–17.

7. What similarities do you see between Romans 8:14–17 and Galatians 4:4–7? Pay attention both to specific words and to general themes.

READ ROMANS 8:22–27.

The similarity between Paul's language in Galatians 4:4–7 and in Romans 8:14–17 prompts Luther to keep Romans 8 in mind in his commentary on Galatians. Luther links the cry "Abba! Father!" to Paul's claim in Romans 8:26 that the Holy Spirit intercedes for us "with sighs too deep for words." From his own experience of doubt and depression, Luther knows all too well the groaning that Paul describes (Romans 8:23).

Christ not only came but continues to come to us daily, Luther insists, but he does not come for those who are smug and self-righteous; rather the Holy Spirit is "nearest to us when we are at our weakest and nearest to despair" (LW 26:383). "In every temptation and weakness," Luther writes, "just cling to Christ and sigh!" (LW 26:384). The Spirit crying "Abba! Father!" in and through us is a powerful reassurance of God's love and faithfulness! Even when we may doubt our value and our place in the family, the Holy Spirit prays and cries out on our behalf, and the Spirit cannot lie or deceive us.

Losing focus

READ GALATIANS 4:8–11.

8. What do you think Paul is trying to say in this passage?

This is a complicated part of Paul's letter. At the most basic level, the "elemental spirits" (which Paul mentioned earlier in 4:3) refer to the pagan beliefs and practices that the Galatians had before receiving the gospel and coming to faith in Jesus Christ. It's not important for Paul to describe them in any detail, because the Galatians know and remember their recent life. When Paul refers to "observing special days, and months, and seasons, and years" (v. 10), New Testament scholar Hans Dieter Betz says simply that "Paul describes the typical behavior of religiously scrupulous people."

Paul is suggesting that if the Galatian Christians choose to observe Jewish law as part of their Christian identity, as they are being pressured to do, the result will be the same as if they returned to their previous pagan beliefs and practices. This may strike us as odd. How can Paul be comparing the faith and practice of the Old Testament with pagan religions?

Remember that Paul argued in Galatians 3 that the Law was intended by God as a temporary measure to guide, direct and discipline the Jewish people until the coming of Christ. Now in "the fullness of time" (4:4) Christ has come, and those who trust in him are no longer subject to the Law. The problem is not with the Law, but with the Galatians' apparent willingness to give up their inheritance in exchange for the placeholder.

Luther compares this to one of Aesop's fables, in which a dog carrying a chunk of meat in its mouth sees its reflection in the water. The dog mistakenly thinks he sees another dog with another piece of meat and decides to challenge this other dog and take his meat away. But as soon as the dog opens his mouth to snarl, he loses hold of his own piece of meat, which falls into the water and is lost. Aesop's moral to the story: "Beware lest you lose the substance by grasping at the shadow."

This is exactly what Paul fears will happen to the Galatians: If the Galatians choose to take up the shadow, the precursor—the Law—they will lose the meat—Christ!

READ GALATIANS 4:12–18.

9. How does Paul try to persuade the Galatians to listen to him? What feelings do his words evoke?

In this passage, Paul writes about his relationship with the Galatians as well as about the relationship the Galatians have with the Jewish Christians who came to Galatia after Paul left. By insisting on circumcision as a requirement for full membership in the church, the Jewish Christians are essentially treating the Galatians, who are Gentile Christians, as second-class citizens.

- 10. Can you think of a time when you or someone you know felt excluded from a group or pressured to conform to someone else's standards in order to be accepted? Does this ever happen in the church?**

We often use “family” language in church, but family language can be misused. Some families—whether biological families or church families—project a sense that joining the family means becoming “just like us.” The reality is that when a new member comes into a family, whether through birth, adoption, marriage or church membership classes, the family itself changes. Just as a happy marriage requires incorporating the gifts and experiences of two different families of origin to form a new family, so a healthy congregation is able to incorporate the gifts and experiences of new members, including those who come from very different cultural contexts.

In contrast to this sense of exclusion the Galatians were feeling, Paul emphasizes the positive nature of the relationship he has with the Galatians. He brought the Gospel to them where they were (“I have become as you are,” 4:12), and they welcomed him with open arms. When Paul says that the Galatians received him “as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus,” that may sound arrogant to us. It helps to remember that the Greek word for “angel” also means “messenger.” An angel is one who brings the message of good news from God, and this is certainly an accurate description of Paul’s ministry among the Galatians.

- 11. Who have been angels of God in your life? In whose life have you yourself been an angel of God?**

Children of the promise

READ GALATIANS 4:19–20.

In his commentary on Galatians, New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop N.T. Wright translates verse 19, “I seem to be in labor with you all over again!” Sometimes when women talk about the pain of childbirth, they conclude by saying that the result—their child!—was worth it. Imagine if you were going through a difficult period with a child (the “terrible twos,” for example) and actually had to go through the physical process of labor and birth all over again. You thought you were done with that!

This seems to be how Paul feels. He had labored to give birth to a gospel community in Galatia, and now he finds himself going through the pain and struggle all over again. Nonetheless, Paul does not walk away. He is willing to go through the pain and struggle again for the sake of the Christian community in Galatia. Even though he is at a loss as to their behavior, he continues to witness to the gospel as God’s free gift, hoping to persuade the Galatians to trust the promise and the Spirit that they have already received through his ministry.

- 12. How does your congregation deal with conflict, especially when the conflict involves the leaders of the congregation? Might Paul’s metaphor of labor pains shape the way we deal with conflict constructively?**

READ GENESIS 17:15–21.

When we talk about God’s promise made to Abraham, it’s really more accurate to speak of the promise made to Abraham and Sarah. God’s promise to bless the nations of the world through Abraham’s descendants specifically includes Sarah as the mother. In Genesis 16, Sarah tried to take matters into her own hands by encouraging Abraham to father a child with her servant, Hagar, but God’s promise was specific: The blessing would come through Abraham and Sarah’s child. God’s promise was unconditional—not even conditioned on Sarah’s fertility!

READ GALATIANS 4:21–31 ALOUD.

- 13. What words or images catch your attention? [Share with your neighbor or in small groups what words stood out for you and why.]**

14. If you are a white woman, how does this passage about the difference between “the slave woman” and “the free woman” and their children make you feel? If you are a woman of color, how does it make you feel?

As Christians today, it’s important for us not to gloss too quickly over the language of slavery, as if it were just an old-time Bible illustration. Martin Luther, in his commentary on Galatians, insisted that this comparison is not an abstraction but applies to the actual church on earth, here and now.

Abraham had two sons, one born to a slave woman and one born to his wife. Although Ishmael and Isaac have the same father, their status as slave or free is determined not by their father but by the status of their mother. The child of a slave woman is a slave, period. This was also the case for centuries in North America, where slave-owners impregnated slave women, sometimes to gratify their sexual desires and sometimes for the explicit purpose of “breeding” more slaves. Even after slavery was abolished, many states continued to have laws defining anyone with a single black ancestor as legally black, thus perpetuating discrimination and inequality.

Taking a hard look at the realities of slavery is relevant for our study of Galatians in at least two ways. First, it sharpens Paul’s conclusion that insisting on obedience to the Law for Christians would be like choosing to return to slavery. Who, having been freed from slavery, would choose to return to a life in which one was treated as property rather than as a person? What woman would knowingly choose to return to a situation in which her body was not her own, not only for its labor but for the sexual gratification of its owner? One of the advocacy areas for Women of the ELCA is human trafficking. Can you imagine a situation in which a group of women or children who had been rescued from being trafficked chose voluntarily to return to that condition of servitude and fear?! We would find it unbelievable! That feeling helps us recognize how shocked Paul was by the behavior of the Galatians.

Second, taking a hard look at the realities of slavery reinforces the genuinely radical nature of Paul’s bold claim that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female (3:28). These words are familiar enough that they are easily taken for granted. But what Paul is proposing as a new community in Christ is as scandalous as it would have been for many 19th century Americans to think of themselves as members of a community of equals with their slaves and former slaves.


My own family history includes such a story of radical inclusivity in Christ. One of my relatives (a white man of German-American descent) was called to serve as pastor to an African American Lutheran congregation in Oklahoma in the 1940s. The members of the congregation were profoundly moved by the fact that my cousin’s wife worshiped and received communion together with them. In the past, they had been served by white pastors whose white wives observed the segregation laws and customs by worshiping in a white congregation. But my cousin and his wife understood Paul’s vision of an inclusive Christian community and lived it out, despite the social and legal distinctions of the day. In Christ we are one!

15. Reflecting on what you have learned, identify one thing to take with you to put your faith into action during the coming month.

Closing prayer

O God, you made us in your own image and redeemed us through Jesus your Son. Look with compassion on the whole human family. Break down the walls that separate us, and unite us in bonds of love; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (adapted from *ELW*, page 79).

Closing hymn

“All Are Welcome” (*ELW* 641) 

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GALATIANS

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

by Kathryn A. Kleinhans

Session three *Heirs of the promise*

Session objectives

- To reflect on the radically inclusive nature of the Christian community
- To recognize the Gospel as God's gift and promise
- To understand the risks of relying on the Law rather than the Gospel

Materials needed

Hymnals, Bibles (NRSV preferred) and Congregational trend report and census data for the optional activity.

Optional activity for question 6:

If you want to go deeper, supplement your perceptions of diversity in your congregation and in your community by looking at data.

Use the “Find a Congregation” link at the upper right of the ELCA homepage (elca.org) to locate the listing for your congregation. Then click on the “Full Trend Report” link to access the data your congregation has submitted to the ELCA as part of its annual report in recent years. There is a lot of information included in the report, including racial and ethnic composition of your congregational membership.

You can access U.S. census data about the racial and ethnic composition of your county and of your city at census.gov/2010census/popmap

Optional discussion question for Galatians 4:20

In this verse, Paul states that he wishes he were present

in person rather than communicating with the Galatians through a letter. In person, he says, he could adjust his tone depending on how the community responded to his words. Because of the presence of vocal and non-verbal elements, in-person communication is harder to misunderstand than written communication.

Can you think of a time when a written or electronic communication—whether to you or from you—was misunderstood? Think about how much more effort it took to straighten out the misunderstanding. Does this have any implications for how we communicate with each other in church (especially in situations of conflict or disagreement)?

Optional discussion questions for Galatians 4:21–31

In this section of his letter, Paul makes a comparison to the stories of Hagar and Sarah and their sons, but he never mentions Sarah's name. Why do you think he does this? Reflect together on your own experience: Can you think of times or situations when women's names were left out of important stories in your church or community? If your congregation has a written history, does it include the names and contributions of women members or primarily of men?

When Sarah despaired of having a child of her own, she encouraged Abraham to father a child with her servant Hagar (Genesis 16:1–6). When Hagar became pregnant, Sarah was frustrated both with Hagar and with Abraham. Have you ever grown tired of waiting for an answer to God's promise? Have you taken matters into your own hands? What happened? How might we help each other to be patient as we wait for the fulfillment of God's promises?

Notes for this session

On the role of the Law

In discussing what is at stake when Christians rely on the Law, you may wish to remind the participants of the section about “Gospel-plus” in the first session of this study. Attempting to add something else to our relationship with God always results in watering down the Gospel.

It may be useful to mention that Luther distinguishes between two different functions or uses of the Law. When we attempt to use it to justify ourselves, it functions theologically to show us our sinfulness and our inability to build a right relationship with God based on our works. In Luther’s words, the Law “drives the conscience to thirst and yearn for the promise of God and to look at Christ” (*LW* 26:364). However the Law also has a civil or political function. Laws are useful to regulate human

society, encouraging good behavior and restricting or punishing bad behavior. As we have noted in previous sessions, the Law is not a bad thing. After all, it is God’s Law. But it is misused when we rely on the Law for our relationship with God, rather than receiving the gift God offers through the Gospel promise.

Pastoral sensitivity

Be aware that the discussion of race and slavery may raise strong emotions. Encourage participants to use “I” statements and to listen to and respect other experiences or points of view that are shared with the group. It may be appropriate to suggest a moment of silence or even a moment of prayer if the conversation becomes awkward or difficult. 🌸

OFFICIAL NOTICE

TENTH TRIENNIAL CONVENTION

Notice is hereby given that the Tenth Triennial Convention of Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America will be held in Minneapolis, Minnesota at the Minneapolis Convention Center, July 11–13, 2017.

Delegate credentialing will begin at 7 p.m. on Monday, July 10, 2017. Delegate orientation will be held at 10 a.m. on Tuesday, July 11, 2017. The convention will open at 9 a.m. on Tuesday, July 11, 2017.

All are encouraged to attend triennial convention plenary sessions where the business of the organization will be conducted.

All are also encouraged to attend “All Anew,” the Women of the ELCA gathering that will follow the convention. Opening session for the gathering is on Thursday, July 13, 2017, at 7 p.m., followed by a reception. Closing worship for the gathering is scheduled for Sunday, July 16, 2017 at 9 a.m.



Rebecca J. Shurson, secretary

Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Churchwide executive board



GALATIANS

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

by Kathryn A. Kleinhans

Session four

For freedom Christ has set us free

Text

Galatians 5:1–6:18

Theme verse

“If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit”
(Galatians 5:25).

Opening hymn

Rise, Shine, You People! *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 665
or Lift High the Cross (*ELW* 660)

Opening prayer

Gracious God, as you free us from the power of sin and death, free us also for faith in you and for loving service of others, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Introduction

Christian freedom is the theme Paul has been building toward throughout Galatians. In chapters 1–2, Paul witnesses to the good news of the gospel, that we are justified by God’s grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In chapters 3–4, Paul offers a series of arguments about faith in God’s promise as the foundation of our relationship with God. In chapter 5, Paul begins encouraging the Galatians to put their faith to work in service of others.

Freed in Christ through faith (Galatians 5:1–12)

READ GALATIANS 5:1–6 ALOUD.

1. What associations do you have with the word “freedom”?
What kinds of freedom can you think of?
2. Do you think “Christian freedom” is different from other kinds of freedom? Discuss your thoughts.

In his 1535 commentary on Galatians, Martin Luther distinguishes Christian freedom from political freedom and also from the kind of personal freedom that expresses itself as self-indulgence. Christian freedom is something much greater. It is a spiritual freedom that “make[s] our conscience free and joyful” (*Luther’s Works* 27:3). It is freedom from fear, freedom from judgment, sin and death.

READ JOHN 8:31–36 ALOUD.

3. How do Jesus’ words about freedom expand your understanding?
4. [Optional] Review Galatians 4:22–31. Compare Paul’s description of the son of the enslaved woman and the son of the free woman to Jesus’ language about the place of the slave and Son in the household.

Paul connects this discussion of Christian freedom back to the issue of circumcision that he addressed in Galatians 2. This connection may seem strange to us, especially as women. As we saw in the first session of our study, circumcision was a key identity marker for the Jewish people, a sign of their covenant relationship with God. Paul is urging the Galatian Christians, who are Gentiles and uncircumcised, to reject the peer pressure from a group of conservative Jewish Christians trying to persuade them to be circumcised.

As important an issue as this was for the first century church, it is an example of a much bigger problem. For Paul, insistence on circumcision for all Christians fails to recognize the radically new nature of the new covenant between God and God's people. Relying on the gospel "plus circumcision" turns the gospel into something else entirely, "a different gospel" (1:6).

Galatians 5:9 uses a metaphor to illustrate this problem: "A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough." Paul's point is that an apparently small thing can make a big difference and can influence the whole. Once done, it can't be undone. Because yeast for baking is a positive image for many of us, another example might help to clarify the danger Paul warns us against. Imagine instead the impact of a spoonful of salt instead of sugar in your coffee or tea: A little bit ruins the whole.

If faith in Christ is incomplete without circumcision, the gospel message is undermined. Depending on something else, even a little bit, as necessary for our righteousness in Christ means that we are no longer trusting God's promise. As Luther writes, "It is impossible for Christ and the Law to dwell in the heart at the same time" (LW 27:16).

Faith, hope and love

REREAD GALATIANS 5:5–6.

5. What does it mean for you to "wait for the hope of righteousness"?

Luther points out that the word "hope" has two meanings in this passage. It refers to the attitude or feeling of hope, and it also refers to the thing being hoped for—righteousness itself. In baptism, we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. Yet we Christians are aware of the ways in which we fall short of living the righteousness that is God's will for us. We are still waiting for the *fulfillment* of God's promised righteousness in our lives. In our times of discouragement, Luther lifts up hope in God's promise as a source of reassurance and comfort. Because God has promised, and because God keeps God's promises, we can be confident of God's love even when we don't feel it. Neither our good deeds nor our bad deeds matter; they

are put aside in light of Christ.

Faith and hope are linked in the New Testament. As Hebrews 11:1 says so memorably, "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." Although we cannot see God's promised future—for us and for our world—we trust it. Faith and hope belong together. As Luther writes, we have hope because "faith shows me Christ, in whom I trust" (LW 27:21).

Yet hope is not passive. According to Luther, "Hope... arouses the mind to be brave and resolute, so that it dares, endures, and lasts in the midst of evils and looks for better things" (LW 27:22). This daring bravery shapes how Christians live in the world as we await the fulfillment of God's promises.

Faith and hope are also linked to love in these verses—not just love as an emotion but love in action! As Luther puts it, love is "the tool through which faith works" (LW 27:28). Faith working through love—particularly love of neighbor—keeps us grounded and centered in our Christian identity. It keeps us from focusing on ourselves and our own accomplishments as if they somehow determined our relationship with God; it also challenges us not to take our faith for granted but to find ways to use it to make a difference.

READ GALATIANS 5:7–12.

In this section Paul returns to his discussion of the "false apostles" who are troubling the Galatian Christians by insisting that they be circumcised. Part of his intent is to reassure the Galatians that they have been misled; they are not at fault.

In verse 7, Paul uses the metaphor of Christian life as running a race. The Galatians had been "running well," but now they have been "prevented." The Greek might also be translated, "Who got in your way?" Their Christian life is being thrown off track. Instead of keeping the eyes of faith focused on Christ, they are being distracted by things that no longer matter.

6. What do you think Paul means by "the offense of the cross" (5:11)?

Some translations use the word “stumbling block” rather than “offense.” This certainly fits Paul’s imagery of running a race. The Greek word is *skandalon*, from which the English word “scandal” is derived. We are so familiar with the cross as a religious symbol that it is helpful to be reminded of its scandalous nature. It offends the religious mind to think that God would become human, suffer and die. It offends our own sense of accomplishment and self-worth to think that righteousness is a gift to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, without depending in the smallest amount on anything we can do. If one is going to stumble, Paul is saying, it should be because of the cross itself, not because of the misleading arguments of others.

In verse 10, Paul says to the Galatians, “I am confident about you in the Lord.” The word “confidence” literally means “with faith.” Commenting on this verse, Luther points out that our confidence in other humans may be deceived; however our confidence in God will never fail us. This is why Paul holds the Galatians confidently in prayer, trusting that God will hold them securely.

What freedom does (Galatians 5:13–26)

READ GALATIANS 5:13–16 ALOUD.

Verse 13 moves from the indicative to the imperative, from description to action. God’s call to freedom in Christ is the foundation for what follows. To use that freedom “as an opportunity for self-indulgence” is to misuse God’s gift, which is intended to be used in service of others.

Luther summarizes Paul’s message clearly and succinctly: “Paul is describing the whole of the Christian life in this passage: inwardly it is faith toward God, and outwardly it is love or works toward one’s neighbor” (LW 27:30). Freedom is not, in the words of the old song, “just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” Christian freedom is the opportunity to invest ourselves in the loving service of others, confident that our own deepest needs are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

7. We often think of freedom primarily as “freedom from” something.

How do you respond to Paul’s view of “freedom for” service?

Read the following passage from Luther’s commentary on Galatians aloud:

“Now our neighbor is any human being, especially one who needs our help, as Christ interprets it in Luke 10:30–37. Even one who has done me some sort of injury or harm has not shed his humanity on that account or stopped being flesh and blood, a creature of God very much like me; in other words, he does not stop being my neighbor. Therefore as long as human nature remains in him, so long the commandment of love remains in force, requiring of me that I not despise my own flesh and not return evil for evil but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21)” (LW 27:58).

8. What words or phrases in this passage caught your attention?

What images did the passage bring to mind? How did it make you feel?

Luther goes on to explain that loving our neighbors is not just a matter of attitude but of action. Love is more than thinking positive thoughts and being polite. Love—Christian love—requires us to act for the benefit of others.

Now think about specific people who have done you harm as an individual. Listen while the passage from Luther is read aloud again.

9. How does it feel to think about these specific people as your neighbors? What might it mean for you to love these individuals, both in word and in deed?

***The works of the flesh* (Galatians 5:16–21)**

Some of the things Paul lists, like fornication and drunkenness, are behaviors of physical self-indulgence. But other things Paul lists—idolatry, jealousy, anger, etc.—are behaviors of the mind and heart rather than the body. When Paul writes about the works or desires of “the flesh,” he is not referring to physical behaviors as such. He is referring to actions and attitudes that result from putting ourselves rather than God (and our God-given

neighbors) at the center of our lives.

The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–26)

We might expect Paul to follow “the works of the flesh” with “the works of the Spirit.” Instead, he uses the language of fruit. Also, Paul uses the singular rather than the plural. The things that Paul lists are part of a unity.

- 10. Why do you think Paul does this? What difference does this make? How does this shape your thoughts about the contrast Paul is making in this passage?**

By speaking of the fruit of the Spirit, Paul is making it clearer that the positive qualities described in this passage are not virtues we aspire to. They are gifts from God, results of God’s Spirit at work within us. An image Jesus often uses in the Gospels is that a good tree bears good fruit. There is nothing the tree can do to make itself productive. A fruit tree depends on what it receives: water, nutrients from the soil and the attentions of a skillful gardener.

READ GALATIANS 5:22–25 ALOUD.

- 11. What words or phrases in this passage caught your attention? What images did the passage bring to mind? How did it make you feel?**
- 12. Where do you see yourself in these verses? To what extent do you hear them as a word of judgment? To what extent do you hear them as a word of gospel?**

The small Greek word translated “if” in verses 18 and 25 would actually be better translated as “since.” Since you are led by the Spirit...(verse 18). Since we live by the Spirit...(verse 25). What follows is not conditional: “If you do this, then that will follow.” What follows is Paul’s description of the consequence of the life in Christ that the Galatians already have.

It’s easy to feel inadequate if we compare our behavior to Paul’s description of “the fruit of the Spirit,” but we shouldn’t be discouraged. Luther points out that in the

Apostles’ Creed we say we believe in a “holy” church, but we don’t always see that. It’s a confession of faith. Christians are not perfect, but we are forgiven. We are called “saints” not because of our virtues but because of our trust in God’s promises.

GALATIANS 6:1–10

READ GALATIANS 6:1–10 ALOUD.

- 13. In the first few verses of chapter 6, how does Paul suggest that we deal with the shortcomings of others? How well does your congregation or small group follow Paul’s advice?**

At the end of chapter 5, Paul contrasted the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. But Christians are not always “guided by the Spirit” (5:25). If we were, we would not need advice on how to deal with personal or communal failure to live out God’s will for us. Paul urges Christians to deal with others according to the Spirit even (perhaps especially) when others fall short of living by the Spirit.

New Testament scholar Hans Dieter Betz suggests that the reason the Galatians have been attracted to the preaching of the Law by the “false apostles” in the first place is that they are frustrated and confused over how to respond to shortcomings and failures of other Christians. Paul’s response is that it’s Christian love given by the Spirit, not the Law, that the Galatians need to guide their behavior and to restore those who go astray.

- 14. In verse 2, Paul writes, “Bear one another’s burdens.” In verse 5, Paul writes, “For all must carry their own loads.” Is this a contradiction? What do you think Paul means?**

These verses respond to the same problem: comparing ourselves with others. Such comparisons can result in the twin sins of pride (in ourselves) and judgment (of others). For Christians, there is no room for pride because God does not measure our accomplishments or grade on a curve, rating us in comparison with our peers. For Christians, there is also no room for judgment, because

those whose lives depend entirely on God's grace are in no position to look down on others.

Instead of pride, we who have received the Spirit are freed to live in gratitude. Instead of judgment, we who have received the Spirit are freed to carry each other's burdens. The Greek verb means to give assistance or relief. Bearing one another's burdens is active and effective. Thus, Luther says that Christians "must have broad shoulders and husky bones" to carry the "burdens and troubles" of others (*LW* 27:113). This is "faith working through love" (5:6).

15. In verses 7–9, Paul uses the metaphor of sowing and reaping.

What might it look like to "sow to the Spirit" in your own life? In the life of your congregation? What resources ("seed") do you personally have that can be invested ("sown") for good?

16. Reread Galatians 6:10. Identify some specific opportunities you have to work for the common good—in your own life, in your workplace and in your community

The phrase "especially for those of the family of faith" (verse 10) might seem like it limits Paul's encouragement to "work for the good of all," but this is not the case. Given the conflict in the Galatian churches, one of Paul's concerns has been to convince his readers that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians—with all their differences—are part of the same Christian community. Paul's phrase is a reminder of the family relationship that Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians already share in Christ.

The marks of Jesus (Galatians 6:11–18)

Paul closes his letter by centering it clearly in the cross of Jesus Christ (verses 12 and 14). The Galatians can trust Paul because, unlike the "false apostles," he is not interested in winning them over in order to boast of his success. His only desire is to boast in the gospel; his focus is not on himself but on the good news of the crucified and risen Christ.

Paul's witness to the gospel is not only verbal but embodied. In verse 17, Paul writes, "I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body." What does he mean by this?

Branding is a way of designating ownership: a permanent marking of the skin indicating to whom something belongs. Historically branding was used with livestock and with enslaved persons. Perhaps a more helpful image for us today is tattooing. For many people, tattoos are a means of self-expression. The choice of an image or a phrase for a tattoo communicates something important about who one is and what she or he values. It can function as a powerful visual symbol of an experience or a relationship. The act of marking one's skin in such a permanent way expresses the deep strength of the value or commitment.

Elsewhere in the New Testament, Christian life is described in terms of imitating Christ, bearing the cross, etc. In this passage, the Christian life is one that bears "the marks of Jesus branded on [one's] body." The Greek word in verse 17 is *stigmata*, which means "signs" or "insignia." Paul is not referring to physical brands or tattoos for Christians but is using this language metaphorically. In passages such as 2 Corinthians 11:23–30, he describes experiences of suffering for the sake of the gospel that have deeply marked him. Paul's own example challenges the Galatian Christians to think about "what brand they are wearing."

17. What are some of the important markers of your identity?

When people look at you, which of these identity markers are most visible?

18. How might we describe "the tattoo-marks of Jesus"?

When people look at you, what evidence of your Christian identity do they see?

READ GALATIANS 6:18 ALOUD TOGETHER.

May the gospel continue to bear fruit in your lives!

Closing prayer

By your word, eternal God, your creation sprang forth, and we were given the breath of life. By your word, eternal God, death is overcome, Christ is raised from the tomb, and we are given new life in the power of your

Spirit. May we boldly proclaim this good news in our words and our deeds, rejoicing always in your powerful presence; through Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. Amen. (ELW, “Spread of the gospel,” page 75)

Closing hymn

For Freedom, Christ Has Set Us Free! ELW 722 or We Are Called, ELW 720 🌸

The Rev. Dr. Kathryn A. Kleinhans holds the Mike and Marge McCoy Family Distinguished Chair in Lutheran Heritage and Mission at Wartburg College, Waverly, Iowa. She is the editor of *Together by Grace: Introducing the Lutherans* (Augsburg Fortress, 2016).

FOR FREEDOM, CHRIST HAS SET US FREE!

ELLACOMBE CMD (ELW722)

	GALATIANS
“For freedom, Christ has set us free!”	5:1
What joy is ours to claim!	
No more enslaved, humanity	4:31
Finds life in Jesus’ name.	
We try, Lord, to be justified	2:17
Through all the works we do.	
Yet you adopt us, saying, “Child, It’s Christ who makes you new.”	4:4–7
We’re clothed in Christ and we belong;	3:27–28
Now no one waits outside.	
In him we find our common song;	
Old ways no more divide.	
“It is no longer I who live, But Christ who lives in me.”	2:20
He died for us, new life to give—	2:18–21
And new identity.	
Now, Spirit-filled, may we be led	5:19
From ways that would destroy.	
May we your people turn instead	5:22–23
To lives of love and joy.	
May we find peace that makes us whole And patience everywhere.	
God, give us kindness, self-control, And hearts and hands that share.	

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This hymn is in *Songs of Grace: New Hymns for God and Neighbor* by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette (Discipleship Resources-The Upper Room Books, 2009) and *Singing the New Testament*, edited by the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship and Christian Reformed Church (Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2008). A complete list of the 180+ new hymns by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette can be found at carolynshymns.com



GALATIANS

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND CHRISTIAN FREEDOM

by Kathryn A. Kleinhans

Session four

For freedom Christ has set us free

Session objectives

- Explore Paul's understanding of Christian freedom
- Reflect deeply on what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves
- Understand the fruit of the Spirit as God's gift to the Christian community

Materials needed

Hymnals, Bibles (NRSV preferred), paper and colored pencils or markers for the optional activity.

Comments on Galatians 5:12

Paul's frustration with the false apostles takes a somewhat crude, sarcastic turn when he says that those who preach circumcision should go all the way and castrate themselves. This is a metaphor that Paul thinks will be rhetorically persuasive. However, it is an unfortunate verse for us to inherit.

Galatians 5:12 must not be used to justify name-calling and mean-spiritedness. Paul's language here is not an example for our own behavior in situations of conflict or disagreement. Despite the harsh language, Paul is not simply insulting his opponents. This verse must be interpreted in the context of Jewish Law. According to Deuteronomy 23:1, "No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD." This prohibition was still in effect in first-century Judaism. A group of conservative Jewish Christians wanted the Galatians to be circumcised in order to

become full members of the community. Paul argues, to the contrary, that for the Gentile Christians to accept circumcision would actually be to exclude themselves from the community of Christ by trusting in the Law instead of God's promise—just as castration would exclude the Jewish Christians from the temple. Suggesting that the "false apostles" castrate themselves is Paul's way of pointing out the logical and theological error in their thinking.

Optional activity for Galatians 6:11–18

Ask each participant to design a tattoo expressing how she has been "marked" by faith in Christ.

Optional closing activity

Before singing the hymn, read it aloud. Have participants look up and read aloud the Bible verses that are the source for each of the lines of the hymn.

Notes about the closing hymn

The text of the hymn "For Freedom Christ Has Set Us Free" was written by the Rev. Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, a Presbyterian pastor currently serving Limestone Presbyterian Church in Wilmington, Delaware, along with her husband, Bruce. Carolyn considers writing new hymn texts to familiar tunes an extension of her ministry. She has given permission to print her hymn text in *Gather* and to use it in women's groups but asks that she be contacted for permission to use the hymn in congregational worship.

If you wish, you may sing the hymn text to a different tune. Use the Metrical Index at back of ELW to identify other hymns whose meter is CMD (Common Meter Double). 🌸