

I spent most this past week at an excellent ministers' retreat. During one of the small group sessions, the question fell to me, *So, Kalyan, what are some of the challenges facing you at the present time?* I wanted to reply, *How much time do you have?*, but then, thought the better of it! I did, however, share the **real** challenge facing me this week: *how do you bring together in an hour's Sunday service, Father's Day message, Paul's message to the church in Galatia on law versus faith, farewell to a much loved young member of the church, all wrapped around a service of communion?* I ask you to please resist the temptation and restrain your urge to give me your report card at the door after the service, but do bring it on Thursday morning!

In the years after Jesus' death and resurrection, and the Pentecost, there was considerable social turmoil. The generation born at the time of Pentecost, did not experience peace in their lifetime. On the one hand, the tension between Jewish religious leaders and Roman administration intensified, leading to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Emperor Titus in AD70. At the same time, there was an astonishing growth of Christ-followers, the Christian community, at the rate of 40% per decade, from "over three thousand"¹ on the day of Pentecost, to over six million in 300AD, and to 33 million in 350AD; from about 2% of the population in 250AD, to just over 50% in 350AD², and these were not *nominal* Christians. They practiced very demanding daily disciplines of prayer and morality, only to be punished by torture and death, yet the community grew.

At the root of this explosive growth starting at Pentecost, is the Holy Spirit who is released to **protect** God's people, and **empower them with boldness** to do the work of God in the world. Pentecost created a buzz in

¹ Acts 2:41

² Attributed as, "adapted from Mike Aquilina and Rodney Stark, at the University of Washington", found at <http://huron2.aaps.k12.mi.us/smitha/HUM/PDF/Growth-of-Chr.pdf>

Jerusalem and it was dangerous to live there as a Christian, but as persecution increased, so did the population of Christians. An exodus of Christians, north from Jerusalem to Antioch in north west Syria, made Antioch the capital of the Christian movement.

Last Sunday we noted Paul was shipped out from Jerusalem via Caesarea to Tarsus, from where he made his way to Antioch, which became his base, from which he started and ended his first journey.

Paul and Barnabas travel to Cyprus and begin a pattern which becomes Paul's trademark: go first to the synagogue and meet the people and leaders there and tell them good news of Jesus Christ, empowering them to carry the message into the community-at-large, thereby helping them to be a part of God's covenant with Abraham. When this did not work, they would go into the town square. The people who heard their message and embraced a new life, became the local Church.³

Paul writes this letter to the Church in Galatia well after his visit, when he receives reports of a crisis triggered by false prophets who have *troubled* and *unsettled*⁴ them. The false teaching is about circumcision: the Jewish religious authorities want to use circumcision to bring gentile converts to Christ, into Judaism: unless you are circumcised, you are not a true Christian. These false teachers want the best of both worlds: to establish themselves as leaders over a sect they create, whilst fending off attacks from Jewish religious authorities.

³ Galatians 3:1-5; 4:13-15

⁴ 1:7 and 5:12 respectively.

It is easy to read the terse language in Paul's letter to the Galatians (the only one that does not have a warm welcome or pleasant ending), as his rebuke and reprimand of the church in Galatia. We can mistakenly read into his language and presentation, Paul's misguided focus on antiquated, conservative doctrine, instead of embracing a progressive change.

This kind of language raises danger flags all over! To set two words, one against the other, **conservative** against **progressive**, suggesting one is the opposite of the other, is extremely dangerous. It plays into people's fears of social rejection: no one really wants to be a dinosaur and to be excluded from all that is *progressive* around us. I may not be **progressive** enough to blow the household budget on the latest gadget as soon as it is in the stores, but neither would I like to be known as the only person in Oxford who uses a black bakelite dial-up phone, just because *my father had it, and so did his father!*

We are **sold** the lie, *keep up with the times, otherwise ...* which means, throw away all you value and hold dear, and embrace everything happening around you, ... otherwise ... It is a veiled threat that plays well into our natural fears of social exclusion.

Paul's caution to the churches in Galatia is to beware, **WE** do not change or dilute or compromise **God's truth** to suit ourselves, to follow society just to keep up with the times, unaware, unsuspecting that **the times** may be misleading!

How then, do we respond to change around us? The best place to start is to remind ourselves, by His very nature, God is unchanging. The author James writes to the 12 tribes of Israel who are dispersed from Jerusalem,

*Whatever is good and perfect comes to us from God above, who created all heaven's lights. Unlike them, He never changes or casts shifting shadows.*⁵

The Psalmist confirms this and declares in his prayer, *The Lord's plans stand firm forever; His intentions can never be shaken*⁶.

Therefore, if God is true to His character, and His character is such that He does not change, then everything about God, including His Law, can be trusted not to change, to be constant.

But the Law had become so burdensome and oppressive. Was it God's Law that had changed and become burdensome?

No! **WE** added burden to the Law.

Right in the middle of his letter to the Galatians, Paul asks a critical question, which most of us would have asked at some time: *What then, is the purpose of the Law?*⁷

God's purpose in giving us the Law was twofold: **first** to protect us from sin, that the Law would give us a code of conduct that would keep us safe from sin until the time of Christ when His death and resurrection opens the door to the way back into God's Kingdom. **Second**, to offer us a glimpse of life in the Kingdom of God, which is perfect, as God is perfect.

Now, if we misuse the Law, by giving it intention and meaning God had not intended from the beginning, who then is to blame?

This is the question Paul asks the Galatians in the context of circumcision: if you want to obey one part (clause) of the law, then you are obligated to

⁵ James 1:17

⁶ Psalm 33:11

⁷ Galatians 3:19

observe the **WHOLE LAW**⁸. Conversely, if you break one part of the law, you are in breach of the **WHOLE** law.

But... Christ has set you free from ceremonial laws and regulations, so why do you want to make yourself a slave to one clause the Law, thereby forcing yourself to obey **ALL OF IT ???!**

We create two problems for ourselves, and we must stop doing this if we are to taste and live the **true** freedom offered by Jesus Christ.

First, stop giving meaning to Law where such meaning was never intended, as we said earlier, deceive people by implying that the opposite of conservative doctrine, is progressive or liberal view of life, misleading people to believe, it is perfectly acceptable to ditch the old way of thinking about God (conservative doctrine) in favour of progressive, modern standards of moral and ethical practice.

Second obeying a **part** of the Law is not a substitute for obeying the whole Law. When we take the driving test, we agree to drive by the **WHOLE** Highway Code. We cannot say, *I agree to drive on the left side of the road, but I don't want to obey the speed limits.*

A greater danger lurks in the background, when we read one half of a commandment and ignore the rest. One of the 10 Commandments starts with the words, *Honour your father and mother.* We disregard the rest of the sentence and ask ourselves, *Now what must I **DO** to show I am honouring them?*, then place burdensome practices to prove we are obeying the law, to show the world, we are honouring our father and mother.

⁸ Galatians 5:2

The commandment says, *Honour your father and mother, **that your days may be long, and that it may go well with you in the land, the Lord your God is giving you.***⁹

God's intention in asking us to honour our fathers and mothers is not that we may enjoy long life, rather that we may enjoy God's presence and favour. If we cannot honour our parents, how than can we honour, *Our Father who is in Heaven, Holy is your Name!*

We live in difficult times, but through his letter to the Galatians, Paul reminds us, *I suspect you would never intend this, but this is what happens. When you attempt to live by your own religious plans and projects, you are cut off from Christ, you fall out of grace. For in Christ, neither our most conscientious religion (practice), nor our disregard of religion, amounts to anything. What matters is something far deeper within us: faith in Christ, expressed in love.*¹⁰

AMEN

⁹ Exodus 20:12 and Deuteronomy 5:16

¹⁰ Galatians 5:5-6