

THREE YEARS LATER

GALATIANS 1: 11-24

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University Church of Chicago

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If you were to characterize the era in which we live, what phrase or label would you give it? Remember “The Age of Aquarius” in the sixties? Or “The Atomic Age”? Or Edith Wharton’s “Age of Innocence”? If I were to delineate one aspect of our common life in this second decade of the twenty-first century, I would call it “The Age of the Memoir.” Plato is alleged to have said, “The world as we know it is disastrous: people quarrel as never before, children do not obey their parents and everyone is writing an autobiography.” Sound familiar?

Go to your local bookstore and look in the biography section or look on the table display of popular new books. Plato seems to be correct: everybody from Laura Bush to Anthony Bourdain to Christopher Hitchens to Carol Burnett—even the much-esteemed Cornel West—is writing one of those “almost-tell-all” memoirs. What they all have in common is the facility to drop names of the famous and near-famous people they have known. “An autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful,” wrote George Orwell. In the abovementioned memoirs, you will find no such revelations.

So, when we hear the Apostle Paul’s recounting of his call to ministry in today’s Epistle lection, we can’t help wondering what is left out. He describes his response to God’s call, his conversion from being a persecutor of the Christians to being a follower of Jesus Christ. He insists this transformation came about not through any human preaching but through a direct revelation from Christ himself. He is explaining all of this to the Galatians to underscore his own authority to convey to them a true and accurate understanding of the Gospel.

This section of his letter begins, “For I want you to know, brothers and sisters,” which here as elsewhere in Paul’s letters draws attention to what follows. It is the first-century equivalent of “Listen up!” Then he tells his self-story: how he was “set apart before I was born and called through God’s grace, was pleased to reveal God’s Son to me, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles.” He then makes clear that he did not confer with any human being. He did not go to Jerusalem to meet with those who were “already apostles,” but he went away to Arabia and then to Damascus. Then, after three years, he went up to Jerusalem to meet with Peter and James the brother of Jesus.

This account is, to say the least, sanitized. There is nothing disgraceful or embarrassing or shameful in it. Paul could be writing a memoir to be displayed in Christian bookstores in Corinth and Ephesus and Philippi. But he was not really writing a memoir; he was reconstructing the Gospel so that it could become amenable to communities of faith that shared no Scripture, theology or moral code with Jesus and his followers. In the absence of these Jewish underpinnings Paul made faith alone the entire content of Christianity.

That faith has to do with a liberation accomplished through the radically self-giving love of Christ. Faith replaces the (sinful) center of personhood with the living presence of Christ.

During the tortuous days of the Stalin regime in an Eastern European country there was a certain psychologist who had an uncanny way of getting innocent people to confess to just about any crime against the state that Stalin decided to accuse them of. This psychologist could get them to confess to anything at all—even things they would never have dreamed of doing, even when they knew that they would be sent to the Gulag as a result of the confession.

When asked for the secret of his evil success, the Stalinist psychologist attributed it to “the Mongolian peasant hypothesis.” When asked to explain the meaning of the term, he told a story:

A nobody of a man, shabby and ill at ease, is brought into a large office that clearly belongs to an important person. Everything smacks of authority: dark mahogany walls, a huge uncluttered oak desk behind which sits an erect, gray-haired man wearing a general’s uniform with rows of medals on his chest. The general speaks:

“I have a million rubles in my desk drawer. Here, take a look. They are all yours?” “Mine?”

“On one condition.” “What condition?”

“You must press this small red button on my desk.”

“What happens when I press the button?”

“An old man in Mongolia drops dead.” “He dies?”

“He dies at once. No pain.” “What for? What has he done?”

“That is none of your business. Trust me. It is for the good of the people. All you need to know is that the moment you press the button, the peasant dies. And you get a million rubles.”

The man presses the button, takes the money and goes home to live with the memory that to get some money he has killed a stranger who did him no harm. He would not have done it for a few rubles, of course. Not even for a thousand, not for ten thousand. But a million? Who could refuse?

However, the man knows in his heart that the amount of money made no difference. Whatever the self-justification for the money, he knows that he killed an innocent stranger to get it. After five years, he can stand the memory no longer. He commits suicide. The million rubles are found stuffed in a sack under his bed. The state takes them back the day of the funeral.

Everybody, according to the Stalinist psychologist, has a Mongolian peasant in her or his life. Everyone has harmed another person for his own advantage, done something so shameful that the memory haunts and plagues. The psychologist digs around in the memory until he finds the peasant. Once he has it, he dangles it in front of the accused person until that person is writhing in shame for being such a

wretched human being. At that point the person will confess to anything in order to atone for the shame.

Lewis Smedes tells that story in his book, *Shame and Grace*, and I suspect it hits a responsive chord in even the most self-righteous among us. Because every one of us has some secret, however long it has been buried under layers of seared conscience, that once it were trotted out would shame us. I have my own “Mongolian peasant” and so do you.

That’s where grace enters the picture. Christianity is not finally about doctrines, a set of beliefs, a form of worship, ascribing to certain forms of church governance, of submitting one’s life to some higher ecclesiastical authority. The Christian faith is about HOW TO LIVE.

That is precisely the reason you and I are here on a summer Sunday morning, isn’t it? We want to find out how to live, how to deal with the hidden “Mongolian peasants” that haunt our dreams. How to find forgiveness and strength and meaning.

We are pilgrims in the ruins of our own lives, in the ruins of an age gone awry, in the ruins of a world that neither understands nor endorses us when we live out our faith. Do not expect the world to give a damn about your faith. You have to live it out in a milieu that not only does not understand but also rejects your ethics.

As Garry Wills has said, We have come to know Paul “through the brilliant self-examinations of Augustine and Luther, of Calvin and Pascal and Kierkegaard. The profound writings of these men and their followers, with all their vast influence, amount to a massive misreading of Paul, to a history misleading of the minds of people down through the centuries—or so goes the argument of Bishop Krister Stendahl.”

Stendahl gave a lecture in which he argued that Luther and his followers took Paul’s argument for freedom from the externals of the Mosaic code as a confession of his own inability to follow moral laws in general. They read as autobiography Paul’s exclamation in Romans 7:22-24: “In my inner self, I am pleased with God’s Law. But I observe another law in my limbs. Miserable person that I am, who is to set me free from this body doomed to death?” These words ring true to more than one of us who worships in University Church today. How can we deal with the sins of the flesh as well as the hidden desires of the heart? What does it mean to be a moral person?

But Stendahl notices an odd thing. In all of Paul’s undoubtedly biographical references, there is no expression of guilt. Far from finding it hard to observe the Mosaic Law, he says that he observed it perfectly in his days as a Pharisee (Philippians 3:6) and he has done nothing since for which his conscience could reproach him (1 Cor. 4:4; 2 Cor. 1:12; Rom. 9:1).

Stendahl gives an answer: **Paul is not telling us about himself.** He is showing us that both Gentiles and Jews—not as individuals but as societies—have failed to observe their covenant with God. Jews rebelled against covenant law and Gentiles have failed to live by conscience. Therefore we live by the grace of

God. And that grace leads us to two basic moral duties: love of God and love of the neighbor. Love is the only law. Paul's message is not one of guilt and dark constraint. It is this:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things (Phil. 4: 8-9).

A.R. Gurney is one of my favorite playwrights. He is an aging Presbyterian from Buffalo, New York who writes sophisticated comedies that probe beneath the smooth, shiny surface of everyday lives. He is one of the few American playwrights to concern himself with middle-class boredom, loss of meaning and desperation for real courage.

His play, "The Fourth Wall," tells the story of a woman who has decorated her New York apartment with a fourth wall completely blank and undecorated. The other three walls have the conventional views, pictures and doors, but instead of putting anything on the fourth wall of their living room, the wife has left it so that visitors and even she and her husband will understand themselves as on stage, trying to communicate beyond the dramatic "fourth wall" with people "out there." She keeps trying to get her husband and their friends to understand that there is something beyond their own cocoon-like existence in their nicely-decorated apartments with all their middle-class accoutrements.

That's what Paul is declaring about God's grace. God has overtaken all of the categories into which human beings sort themselves. The only category that remains is "in Christ." And that makes us, the followers of Christ, "a new creation" (6:15).

"God is still speaking" is how the United Church of Christ describes the implications of this new-found freedom in Christ.

One of my favorite poets, the Anglican priest, R.S. Thomas who served in Wales for so many years, expressed it in "The Epitaph":

You ask me what it was like?
I lived, thought, felt the temptation
Of spirit to take matter
As my invention, but bruised my mind
On the facts: the old stubbornness
Of rock, the rough bark of a tree,
The body of her I would make my own
And could not.

And yet they ceased;
With the closing of my eyes they became
As nothing. Each day I had to begin
Their assembly, as though it were I
Who contrived them. The air was contentment
Of spirit, a glass to renew
One's illusions. Christen me, christen me,
The stone cried. Instead I bequeathed
It these words, foreseeing the forming
Of the rainbow of your brushed eyes
After the storm in my flesh.