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The Way Forward: Loving Jesus More Than Our Tradition

The debate rages on at a fevered pitch. How will we choose to be in ministry with, to and for Christians who are of a different sexual orientation than that which is traditionally accepted?

I believe we can gain insight and practical guidance from the experience of the apostle Paul as he establishes the church in Galatia. First, read the letter. It will take you 30-40 minutes at most. It's imperative to keep in mind the events of Paul's conversion as you read the letter. Why? Because Paul invites the church to engage in the same spiritual awakening that he has undergone. He states that his experience of the risen Christ informs and shines new light on his understanding of the scripture and his beloved Hebrew religious traditions . . . his experience of . . . the . . .risen...Christ!

Paul emphasizes that the risen Christ has called him and speaks to him and, because of this, the risen Christ holds ultimate authority over life, interpretation of scripture and long-held religious traditions/practices. Galatians 1:12 says,

"I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ."

Paul urges the church throughout his letter to be engaged in a dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit . . . to live in the Spirit . . . be guided by the Spirit . . . to bear the fruit of the Spirit. Paul says he learned to love and cooperate with Jesus through the gift of Jesus' indwelling Spirit.

Critical to our understanding of Paul and his teaching is his Damascus Road encounter with the risen Christ . . . his ego-shattering, life-altering experience with Jesus (read Acts 9:2-19). Further, Paul provides a detailed narrative to convince the Galatians that he has not come to this new orientation in life – a more expansive theology and acceptance- without great struggle (Gal. 1:11-2:21). He describes having spent considerable time in prayer on Mt. Sinai, where thousands of years earlier Moses had received the Law. Paul's particular school of thought/theology (Shammaite) guarded the Law, and the traditions surrounding it, with violent fervor. But after his conversion encounter, many of his Mt. Sinai visits yielded direct revelations from Jesus.

These direct revelations from Jesus make him see that non-Jews are just as beloved to God as Jews. It became crystal clear that people did not need to follow all the rituals of the Hebrew tradition to experience God's love and salvation fully. Jesus the Messiah has come for all people!

The love of Jesus captures Paul's heart. He surrenders to Christ's authority. He gives himself completely to God's mission of redemption in the world. It's a mission to every man, woman and child. He says in Galatians 3:28,

“There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

I believe this wisdom can be applied in our pursuit of a more compassionate, more inclusive and more faithful ministry, both “in” and “as” the church today, as we face the challenges that threaten our unity in Christ. I challenge you, even as I encourage you, to seek personal encounters with the living Christ, both as individual disciples and as the gathered church called Skipwith. Draw nearer to Christ, and He will draw nearer to you. Choose to love Jesus above all else! Choose to love Jesus above our traditions, above our opinions, above our personal comfort, above “the way we’ve always believed or done it”, above our position or status . . . ABOVE ALL ELSE.

I don’t deserve the love that God, in Christ by the Holy Spirit, bestows on me. I don’t deserve that Jesus laid down His to life to redeem mine. I don’t deserve the grace I live in every moment of every day. I don’t deserve the forgiveness that sets me free. Even so, I want and need it all. What’s more, I want others to experience this joy too.

Seek the heart of God as revealed in Jesus, and let the heart of God shine through your living.

Pastor Todd