



Who were the Galatians? Galatia was a northern province of today's Turkey. Once Paul had stopped there (Acts 16:6) when an illness had prevented him from pursuing his journey (Gal 4:13-14). He had visited the Galatians again (Acts 18:23) before settling in Ephesus (Acts 19:1) and he had asked them to help the poor in Jerusalem (1 Cor 16:1).

Paul is writing because the community is in danger. Strangely enough, Paul does not make any reference to scandals, laxity or to conflicts of authority, as it was the case in Corinth. There were tensions and doubts as some people wanted to go back to Jewish practices. However, it seems that the community was not expecting such a warning from Paul. He had shown greater foresight. Some people wanted to return to religious practices because they had failed to understand that being Christian was primarily living one's faith rather than practicing a religion.

For the Galatians, discovering the Gospel had been like a bath in freedom. Those who were Jewish were freed from the constraint of religious practices and those who were Greek (and pagan) were freed from the prejudices of their society: it was like a great cleansing. But were they able to follow Paul when he declared that Christ was able to fill our lives and that the Spirit is a much better guide than any religious obligations?

At first, the Galatians had experienced what was at the core of Paul's life. But the community found it difficult to maintain itself along such a new line. After their initial enthusiasm, most of these new Christians felt a need for rules and practices. They did have faith in Christ but it was asking for a lot to want all of them to be "spiritual" people.

It was precisely at that time that preachers of Jewish origin were exhorting them to be circumcised and to observe the customs of Israel (4:10) by promising them a life superior to the life obtained by conversion to Christ.

Belonging to Judaism would have brought material security to the Galatians since the Israelite religion was protected by Roman laws. If they refused both idolatry and the Jewish religion, they were running the risk of being persecuted (6:12-14). On the contrary, if they adopted the Jewish nationality and the customs of Israel, they would have avoided persecution but that would have been the same as saying that Christ had died for nothing (2:21).

This is the reason why Paul reacted passionately. All of us, Jews and pagans, are solely saved by the generosity of God who has forgiven our sins and who has given us, along with his Spirit, the freedom of love (5:13-14). When we give too much credit to the rules and practices of a religion, we are locking ourselves into a system, an order in which we expect, even without saying it, a reward for our good deeds. On the contrary, faith means surrendering to God and his mystery that is as awesome as its symbol, the cross. Faith also means

believing that God wants the salvation of all human beings, regardless of their nationality (3:9).

This should be enough to understand that this letter to the Galatians is still addressing us in our time when so many people reduce religion to practices. Moreover, it is a fact that to the extent that the Church has to sustain many Christians who have a very limited experience of life in the freedom of the Spirit, it tends to bring itself to their level and to become a religion. This is why the Church has to regain the awareness of its identity and to rediscover the meaning of living by faith.

1:11;
Rom 1:1;
Acts
20:24

1 • ¹From Paul, an apostle sent not by humans nor by human mediation

but by Christ Jesus and by God, the Father, who raised him from the dead;

Acts
16:16;
18:23

²I and all the brothers and sisters who are with me greet the churches in Galatia: ³may you receive grace and peace from God our Father and from Christ Jesus our Lord.

1Jn 5:19;
Acts 2:40

⁴He gave himself for our sins to rescue us from this evil world, in fulfillment of the will of God the Father:

⁵Glory to him forever and ever. Amen.

There is no other gospel

• ⁶I am surprised at how quickly you have abandoned God who called you according to the grace of Christ, and have gone to another gospel.

• **1.1** Paul reminds them and stresses the fact that he has been called and sent directly by God. Speaking of apostles he does not first think of Jesus' Twelve who had been sent by him, but of others who had this title, sent by the Church and God, but in fact chosen by people.

• **6.** *I am surprised at how quickly you have abandoned God... and have gone to another gospel.* There are many ways of preaching the Gospel and making of it a different one, no longer the Good News given by God through Jesus. Some of the Galatians who were of Jewish origin did not understand it. The style of life, in appearance more religious, that they were trying to impose on the community, was in fact a way of doubting Jesus, who alone is Savior.

⁷Indeed, there is no other gospel, but some people who are sowing confusion among you want to turn the Gospel of Christ upside down.

⁸But even if we ourselves were giving you another gospel different from the one we preached to you, or if it were an angel from heaven, I would say: let God's curse be on him! ⁹As I have said I now say again: if anyone preaches the Gospel in a way other than you received it, fire that one. ¹⁰Are we to please humans or obey God? Do you think that I try to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Paul teaches what he received from God

• ¹¹Let me remind you, brothers and sisters, that the Gospel we

The one we preached to you (v. 8). Astonishing words for us who are used to receiving different points of view: was Paul then infallible? He knew he was bearer, not only of the Word of God, but also of the "truth of the Gospel." In fact the faith of the Church has always been the faith of the apostles: we believe in Jesus as the apostles believed, understood and taught. It is impossible to make this a subject of discussion without departing from the Christian faith. The doctrine received from the apostles and guarded by the Church is what we call Tradition.

• **11.** The enemies of Paul criticize his authority saying that he was not an apostle like those Jesus had chosen. Paul will then briefly recall his itinerary: see on this subject Acts 9:1-31.

2Cor
11:4;
Acts
15:24

1Thes
2:4

preached to you is not a human message, ¹²nor did I receive it from anyone, I was not taught of it but it came to me as a revelation from Christ Jesus. ¹³You have heard of my previous activity in the Jewish community; I furiously persecuted the Church of God and tried to destroy it. ¹⁴For I was more devoted to the Jewish religion than many fellow Jews of my age, and I defended the traditions of my ancestors more fanatically.

Mt 16:17

2Cor 11:21; Acts 8:1

Phil 3:6; Acts 26:4; Mt 7:3

Jer 1:5; Is 49:1; Mt 1:15

Acts 9:26

¹⁵But one day God called me out of his great love, he who *had chosen me from my mother's womb*; and he was pleased ¹⁶to reveal in me his Son, that I might make him known among the pagan nations. Then I did not seek human advice ¹⁷nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me. I immediately went to Arabia, and from there I returned again to Damascus. ¹⁸Later, after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to meet Cephas, and I stayed with him for fifteen days. ¹⁹But I did not see any other apostle except James, the Lord's brother. ²⁰On writing this to you, I affirm before God that I am not lying.

²¹After that I went to Syria and

Cilicia. ²²The churches of Christ in Judea did not know me personally; ²³they had only heard of me: "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he tried to uproot." ²⁴And they praised God because of me.

Acts 9:30; 11:25

Paul with the apostles

2 • ¹After fourteen years I again went up to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and Titus came with us. ²Following a revelation, I went to lay before them the Gospel that I am preaching to the pagans. I had a private meeting with the leaders—lest I should be working or have worked in a wrong way. ³But they did not impose circumcision, not even on Titus who is Greek and who was with me. ⁴But there were some intruders and false brothers who had gained access to watch over the way we live the freedom Christ has given us. They would have us enslaved by the Law, ⁵but we refused to yield even for a moment; so that the truth of the Gospel remain intact for you.

Acts 15:2

Acts 15:19

Acts 15:24; Rom 16:15

⁶The others, the more respectable leaders—it does not matter what they were before: God pays no at-

Dt 10:17

To reveal in me his Son (v. 16). Paul has not only "seen" Christ, he discovered him intimately present in himself. The risen Christ, Word and Wisdom of God, gave him in a unique illumination all the truth of faith (not all the truths which are only partial aspects which we may discover in different stages of life).

The case of Paul, whom Christ called directly, is special. Yet we see that Paul did not impose himself on the Church. Christ sent him to ask Ananias for baptism. Later he saw "Cephas" (the Aramean name for Peter), recognized head of the Church, and James, responsible for the Church of Jerusalem. This "union" or "communion" is indispensable for acting in the name of the Church.

Paul says: *They acknowledged the graces God gave me* (2:9): they recognized that the Spirit of God was in Paul's work. The leaders in the Church do not impose a personal policy,

but they try to recognize the call of the Holy Spirit.

• **2.1** This meeting in Jerusalem is related in Acts 15 and its commentary is found there.

When they became Christians, the Jews by race and religion continued to observe the Law of Moses in which the great commandments (to know God, not to murder...), the rituals of worship, and national customs are combined. When people of different races began to be converted to Christ, Paul demanded that they should not be forced to follow the Mosaic Law. Naturally, they had to respect their neighbor and were not to steal, but this emerges from the Gospel without having to impose the Mosaic Law.

So that the truth of the Gospel remain intact for you (v. 5). Because the Gospel frees us from all that limits our horizon. God is pure lib-

Rom 1:5;
15:15

tention to the status of a person—gave me no new instructions. ⁷They recognized that I have been entrusted to give the Good News to the pagan nations, just as Peter has been entrusted to give it to the Jews. ⁸In the same way that God made Peter the apostle of the Jews, he made me the apostle of the pagans.

Mk 5:37;
9:2

⁹James, Cephas and John acknowledged the graces God gave me. Those men who were regarded as the pillars of the Church stretched out their hand to me, and Barnabas as a sign of fellowship; we would go to the pagans and they to the Jews.

Acts
24:17;
1Cor
16:8;
2Cor 8:1

¹⁰We should only keep in mind the poor among them. I have taken care to do this.

The conflict with Peter

• ¹¹When later Cephas came to Antioch, I confronted him since he

deserved to be blamed. ¹²Before some of James' people arrived, he used to eat with non-Jewish people. But when they arrived, he withdrew and did not mingle anymore with them, for fear of the Jewish group. ¹³The rest of the Jews followed him in this pretense, and even Barnabas was part of this insincerity. ¹⁴When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the Gospel, I said to Cephas publicly: If you who are Jewish agreed to live like the non-Jews, setting aside the Jewish customs, why do you now compel the non-Jews to live like Jews?

Acts
15:10

• ¹⁵We are Jews by birth; we are not pagan sinners. ¹⁶Yet we know that a person is justified not by practicing the law but by faith in Christ Jesus. So we have believed in Christ Jesus that we may receive true right-

Rom
3:22;
Acts
15:11;
Ps 143:2

erty and pure gift. May he be seen (it is not wrong) as the fabulous creator of an immense universe, or (what has more truth) as unique Love and Lover, Father of all who are able to return his love, he cannot tie us to a certain way of dressing nor enclose himself in our cooking and our times of prayer. Time has come for reciprocal kindness (Jn 1:17).

We are concerned, and rightly so, for keeping true faith. Here Paul shows that keeping the truth of the Gospel is not only a matter of formulas; our very way of life, free vis-à-vis of all that is not God, proclaims what the Gospel is.

It does not matter what they were before (v. 6). Peter, James and John had no titles, or money or culture. They may even have been despised by more learned believers. Paul does not pay attention to that; he looks upon them only as the leaders of the Church.

• 11. In the church, Paul feels it is his duty to reprimand the supreme leader, the first pope. Jesus promised Peter that his faith would not fail but he did not say that he would never make a mistake.

Jesus did not eat with pagan non-Jews since, for them, it would have been something "impure," a blemish. When some Jews were converted and entered the Church, if they had maintained this attitude toward their Christian

brothers and sisters from another race, they would have kept an inadmissible division within a community renewed by Christ.

Peter (or *Cephas*: see Jn 1:42) knows that now all people are equal and he accepts for himself, not to take the Law into account. Yet he is afraid of what his friends and compatriots will think. He does not realize that, in order to please them, he is endangering the evangelization of those who are not Jewish. These people, in being seen as impure, are no longer at home in the Church. They are pressured to adopt the Jewish customs and with this, they will become alien to their own people. If they do not comply, they will be second-class citizens in the Church.

This problem is always with us, since often those who give the tone in the Christian community belong to a certain social level: others have no reason to do everything as they do. Each one in the Church comes from a particular milieu with its culture and language: we have the right to be shocked by what is foreign to our own culture but we must bear many things we do not like. The Church has to be open to diverse peoples.

• 15. *We are Jews...* Paul develops here what his reply to Peter contained: when you welcomed Christian faith, you gave up any

eousness from faith in Christ Jesus, and not from the practices of the Law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

¹⁷Now, if in our own effort to be justified in Christ we ourselves have been found to be sinners, then Christ would be at the service of sin. Not so! ¹⁸But look: if we do away with something and then restore it, we admit we did wrong.

Rom 7:1; 8:11

¹⁹As for me, the very Law brought me to die to the Law, that I may live for God. I am crucified with Christ.

Phil 1:21; Col 3:3; Jn 13:1; Tit 2:14

²⁰Do I live? It is no longer me, Christ lives in me. My life in this body is life through faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.

5:4

²¹In this way I don't ignore the gift of God, for, if justification comes through the practice of the Law, Christ would have died for nothing.

We are saved by faith

1Cor 2:2

3 • ¹How foolish you are, Galatians! How could they bewitch you after Jesus Christ has been pre-

sented to you as crucified? ²I shall ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by the practice of the Law, or by believing the message? ³How can you be such fools: you begin with the Spirit and end up with the flesh!

⁴So you have experienced all this in vain! Would that it were not so! ⁵Did God give you the Spirit and work miracles among you, because of your observance of the Law or because you believed in his message? ⁶Remember Abraham: *he believed God and because of this was held to be a just man.* ⁷Understand then that those who follow the way of faith are sons and daughters of Abraham.

Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3

⁸The Scriptures foresaw that by the way of faith, God would give true righteousness to the non-Jewish nations. For God's promise to Abraham was this: *In you shall all the nations be blessed.* ⁹So now those who take the way of faith receive the same blessing as Abraham who believed; ¹⁰but those who rely on the practice

Gen 12:3

Dt 27:26;

hope of being rewarded for fulfilling the commandments; you put instead all your trust in Jesus as a Savior. This challenge has made Christian faith very strong. If now, for fear of scandalizing the Jews you decline from eating with non-Jews, all will understand that you have gone too far and that in fact the Law is still valid.

If we do away with something and then restore it (v. 18). This is exactly what the Galatians are doing in their turn. Paul taught them to be free of the prejudices of their pagan religion just as of the practices of the Old Testament. Now without these practices they feel naked: was faith in Christ sufficient when all around them each one had religion and practices? It was not pleasant to be circumcised, but at least, it gave you an identity.

We have here a summary of what Paul will develop four years later in chapters 2–8 in his letter to the Romans. We must not let the defense of Christian freedom, something that was so new and had not finished cracking cultural and social molds, hide from us what Paul would most like to transmit: "Christ lives in

me." Paul is not a theoretician; what makes him write today and tomorrow urges him to cross seas and traverse mountains is a passionate love of Jesus–God. It would need audacity to comment on this dwelling of Christ in those he loves and who love him. It has taken nothing less than this love without reserve, to bring about the greatest achievement of Christian faith and yet the least noticed: pardon and humility among others: *with Christ I am crucified.*

• **3.1** A good number of these Galatians are of Jewish origin, the others already have some notion of the Old Testament given that it is read in Church meetings (the New Testament does not yet exist). Paul then will recall first their own experience in baptism, when they received the Spirit; he will later interpret this experience in reading the Old Testament.

You begin with the Spirit and end up with the flesh (v. 3). This phrase has a double meaning. First the Galatians experienced the working of the Holy Spirit and his miracles and now they want to receive circumcision in the

Rom 7:7;
Jas 2:10

of the Law are under a curse, for it is written: *Cursed is everyone who does not always fulfill everything written in the Law.*

Hb 2:4

¹¹It is plainly written that no one becomes righteous, in God's way, by the Law: *by faith the righteous shall live.* ¹²Yet the Law gives no place to faith, for according to it: *the one who fulfills the commandments shall have life through them.*

Lev 18:5;
Rom 10:5Dt 21:23;
Acts 5:30

¹³Now Christ rescued us from the curse of the Law by becoming cursed himself for our sake, as it is written: *there is a curse on everyone who is hanged on a tree.* ¹⁴So the blessing granted to Abraham reached the pagan nations in and with Christ, and we received the promised Spirit through faith.

The promise, not the Law, was the gift of God

• ¹⁵Brothers, listen to this comparison. When anyone has made his

will in the prescribed form, no one can annul it or add anything to it. ¹⁶Well now, what God promised Abraham was for *his descendant*. Scripture does not say: *for the descendants*, as if they were many. It means only one: *this will be for your descendant*, and this is Christ. ¹⁷Now I say this: if God has made a testament in due form, it cannot be annulled by the Law which came four hundred and thirty years later; God's promise cannot be cancelled. ¹⁸But if we now inherit for keeping the law, it is not because of the promise. Yet that promise was God's gift to Abraham.

Gen 12:7

Rom 11:16

The Law was part of God's pedagogy

• ¹⁹Why then the Law? It was added because of transgressions; but was only valid until the descendant would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator. ²⁰A

Acts 7:38;
7:53;
Gal 4:3;
Col 2:15;
Heb 2:2

flesh. In another sense, they started with the truth of God that was in Jesus: that is "the spirit." Now they go back to Jewish observances which, though they come from God, many times remained, as any religious practice, at a human level: the flesh.

Those who disturbed the Galatians said: you belong to Christ, but Christ is a descendant of Abraham and a Jew. Then follow Abraham and do as the Jews do: and so, along with Christ, you will be children of Abraham. Paul reports that one is not a son of Abraham or a son of God by race: this is a point that he develops more in Romans 4.

Let us not think that such prejudices have disappeared. There are some who think they are Catholics because they have been baptized at birth: they forget that without faith, baptism is meaningless.

Righteousness or justification (v. 8). Like in Romans Paul will use this word abundantly. It means that through faith we are set right with God and our self is re-ordered so as to enter his ways.

• 15. We know that, in the Bible, *Testament* and *Covenant* mean the same: the Old

Testament is the first covenant of God with humankind. Here Paul compares God with someone making a testament.

First God made a solemn covenant with Abraham. He did not demand anything of him, but made a promise to him. All that God expected of Abraham's children in order to save them was that they would trust him. After such an important initiative from God, the Law which the Lord gave to Moses later did not really change the situation. Therefore, Paul says, most of the Jews are wrong when they are so concerned about observing the Law and so little concerned about opening their hearts.

• 19. In the preceding paragraph Paul began to show that there were different stages in faith history. The Jews already saw a progression in the revelation of God: they spoke of successive covenants of God with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses. For them the progress was that God had given a more complete law and that his choice was narrowing to the point of concentrating all his promises on the small Jewish community. Paul, as we have seen, shows that progress is elsewhere: God has replaced a religion where faith was, in

mediator means that there are parties, and God is one.

²¹ Does the Law then compete with the promises of God? Not at all. Only if we had been given a Law capable of raising life, could righteousness be the fruit of the Law. ²² But the Scriptures have declared that we are all prisoners of sin, so the only way to receive God's promise is to believe in Jesus Christ.

We are now sons and daughters of God

²³ Before the time of faith had come, the Law confined us and kept us in custody until the time in which faith would show up. ²⁴ The Law then was serving as a slave to look after us until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ With the

coming of faith, we are no longer submitted to this guidance.

²⁶ Now, in Christ Jesus, all of you are sons and daughters of God through faith. ²⁷ All of you who were given to Christ through baptism, have put on Christ. ²⁸ Here there is no longer any difference between Jew or Greek, or between slave or freed, or between man and woman: but all of you are one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And because you belong to Christ, you are of Abraham's race and you are to inherit God's promise.

4 • ¹ But listen, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything. ² He is subject to those who care for him and who are entrusted with his affairs until the time

Rom 3:9;
11:32;
2Cor 3:7

Jn 1:12;
Rom
13:14;
Eph 4:24

Rom
10:12;
1Cor
12:13;
Col 3:11;
Jn 17:21

Col 2:17;
Heb 10:1

3:23

fact, obedience to a law, by faith which is gift of self to God, as response to God, person to person.

Here Paul says more: there is a pedagogy of God in this change. "The Law led us to the school" (3:24): let us look at the word "pedagogy": in Greek it signifies "take the child to school." At this time the children of well-to-do families were entrusted to a servant called "pedagogue" who took the child to school but did not teach. Here Paul says: the Law was the servant, while Christ is the master.

Why then the Law? Paul will raise the question in Romans 3:1; 5:20; 7:7. He gives here his response in 4:1. He points out the negative character of the Law that constantly denounces and condemns: *Scriptures have declared that we are all prisoners of sin* (v. 22). It is good that for a time God obliges us to keep our eyes fixed on our sins, our infidelity and ingratitude towards him, but he is much more concerned in making us grow, consequently becoming able to deal with him, person to person. Some will say: "This simplicity with God, we shall have up there." That, however, is not what God wishes. He wants his kingdom to be among us now.

The Law was the means of leading the Jewish people to a better understanding of human hard-heartedness in relation to God, and giving them a sense of sin. It served as an education of a people during a certain time.

With this we can understand verse 19: with Moses as their mediator. Paul does not consider the Law something divine and eternal, dictated by God himself. He thinks that God let the angels in charge of diverse historical forces decide together on this temporary arrangement, so that the law would fit a particular time and circumstance; then Moses had to reconcile their diverse demands. The same thought is expressed in 4:3. In short, the Old Testament already contains the divine truth, but it has come down to us through mediators who adapted it to their ways and obscured it.

For each of us, it is necessary to have been submitted to a law, to have learned to obey without discussion during our early years. This first formation is irreplaceable; later we shall know how to obey our conscience without confusing it with our caprices. It was the same for God's people as a whole: the Law led them to the freedom of the Gospel (5:1). So, if Christ has already taught us, why return to Jewish practice?

• **4.1** *As long as the heir of the host is a child.* God made people to be free, holy, strong, in the image of Christ. No one is born as an adult; she must be a child first. Similarly humankind has to go through infancy. There was a primitive society, a naive science, a simple culture, a transitional religion. People re-

3:19; set by his father comes. ³In the same
Eph 2:21 way we as children were first sub-
jected to the created forces that gov-
ern the world. ⁴But when the fullness
1Cor 10:11; of time came, God sent his Son. He
Eph 1:10; came born of woman and subject to
Heb 1:2; the Law, ⁵in order to redeem the sub-
Rom 7:4 jects of the Law, that we might re-
ceive adoption as children of God.
Mk 14:36; ⁶And because you are children, God
Jn 15:15 has sent into your hearts the Spirit of
his Son which cries out: *Abba!* that
is, Father!

Rom 8:17 ⁷You yourself are no longer a slave
but a son or daughter, and yours is
the inheritance by God's grace.

2Cor 12:2; ⁸When you did not know God,
1Thes 1:9 you served those who are not gods.

1Cor 8:2; ⁹But now that you have known
13:12; God—or rather he has known you—
Col 2:18 how can you turn back to weak and
impoverished created things? Do

you want to be enslaved again?
¹⁰Will you again observe this and
that day, and the new moon, and this
period and that year...? ¹¹I fear I may
have wasted my time with you.

I still suffer for you

• ¹²I implore you, dearly beloved,
do as I do, just as I became like you.
You have not offended me in any-
thing. ¹³Remember that it was an ill-
ness that first gave me the opportu-
nity to announce the Gospel to you.
¹⁴Although my illness was a trial to
you, you did not despise or reject
me, but received me as an angel of
God, as Christ Jesus.

¹⁵Where is this bliss? For I can
testify that you would have even
plucked out your eyes to give them
to me. ¹⁶But now, have I become
your enemy for telling you the truth?

1Cor
9:21;
1Thes
1:6

1Cor 2:3

Mt 10:40

mained “among slaves”; Paul saw them dependent on “created forces” that govern the world. For him the laws of nature as well as the rules and prejudices of primitive peoples are one with the invisible forces of good and evil (the word we translated as “created forces” also means “directing principle”: Eph 3:10; Col 2:15). Now, through Christ, the great door of freedom opens to us. First, Christ liberates people from religious superstitions and from the prejudices that prevent them from knowing the Father and from becoming his children.

He came born of woman and subject to the Law (v. 4). Christ saves humans because he is a man. Christ came first as the savior of the Jewish people and, to save them, he became one of them. He received his whole formation from the Law, namely, from the people and religion of the Old Testament. This Law was highly positive, but, as time passed, we had to be redeemed from the yoke of this Law to receive the fullness of divine truth.

We must see in this obedience of Christ *born of woman and subject to the Law* a fundamental disposition of the plan of salvation: God saves us by becoming one of us. The same is now true of the Church, which saves people rather than giving to them or “being interested in them.” The Church cannot bring them a permanent and transforming salvation if it does not share in their very condition.

This is the reason why the Lord wants Third World churches to bear the cross of the people of their continents: their marginalization, their sufferings and humiliations, in order to lead them to authentic salvation. When there are only middle-class churches following occidental or Roman patterns, these churches are unfaithful to their mission.

You want to be enslaved again? (v. 9). We soon tire of liberty, for it always complicates life. It would be much simpler to be told: “This is right, that is a sin.”

Paul said to the Galatians: “You belong to Christ, be guided by his Spirit.” Did they really want to be more pliable with their ready-made judgments? Were they ready to restrain that kind of pride that accompanies the eagerness for social recognition? If not, there would be no Spirit. The Galatians actually preferred to walk along familiar paths. They kept certain festive days and obeyed the rules just like the Jews; they were, in fact, quite content with a mediocre faith and a love that risks nothing.

• 12. Here, a few more personal lines. These Galatians loved Paul, and Paul loved them, but some aspect of faith escaped them. That is why they felt more at ease with others than with Paul, those who had a sense of “religion” and did not fail to profit from it.

¹⁷Those who show consideration to you are not sincere; they want to separate you from me, so that you may show interest in them. ¹⁸Would that you were surrounded with sincere care at all times, and not only from me when I am with you!

¹⁹My children! I still suffer the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you. ²⁰How I wish I could be there with you at this moment and find the right way of talking to you.

The comparison of Sarah and Hagar

• ²¹Tell me, you who desire to submit yourselves to the Law, did you listen to it? ²²It says that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman, the other by the free woman, his wife. ²³The son of the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but the son of the free woman was born in fulfillment of God's promise.

²⁴Here we have an allegory and the figures of two covenants. The first is the one from Mount Sinai, represented through Hagar: her children

have slavery for their lot. ²⁵We know that Hagar was from Mount Sinai in Arabia: she stands for the present city of Jerusalem which is in slavery with her children.

²⁶But the Jerusalem above, who is our mother, is free. ²⁷And Scripture says of her: *Rejoice, barren woman without children, break forth in shouts of joy, you who do not know the pains of childbirth, for many shall be the children of the forsaken mother, more than of the married woman.*

²⁸You, dearly beloved, are children of the promise, like Isaac. ²⁹But as at that time the child born according to the flesh persecuted Isaac, who was born according to the spirit, so is it now. ³⁰And what does Scripture say? *Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave cannot share the inheritance with the son of the free woman.*

³¹Brethren, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.

Heb
12:22;
Rev
21:2;
Is 54:1

1Thes
2:14

Gen
21:10

• 21. In the history of his ancestor Abraham, Paul discovers an image of conflict opposing the true believer to the "Judaizers"—those who say one is saved by religiously observing practices.

At the start of sacred history is Abraham's faith and the promise God made to him. It should be noted that this promise was not to be inherited in the same way as family goods, which had to be distributed among all the children. The promise will not come to Ishmael *born like any other*. (Paul says: "born according to the flesh".) Rather, what God promised was only destined for *the son of promise*, Isaac: the one who was born through a miraculous and free intervention of God. Thus, from the very beginning of the Bible, we see that we do not come to faith and to God's inheritance because we have a right to them, but through grace.

By clinging to their religious observances, the Jews were forgetting that they were, above all, *the people of the promise*. Chosen by God in preference to other people, their mis-

sion was to announce that there are promises of God for all nations. They were wrong in thinking thus: since we are chosen by God, let everyone do what we do and observe our practices. Instead they should have shared their hopes with others; they should have taught others to believe in God's promise and not put their trust in particular religious practices.

Hagar, the slave woman who gave birth to Ishmael, ancestor of the Arabs, becomes the image of the people of the first covenant, people who received the Law on Mount Sinai in Arabia: they did not achieve true freedom and held the earthly Jerusalem as their capital.

While Sarah, the free woman, with her son Isaac, born according to the divine promise, represents God's new covenant with those who believe in his promises. These are the free people, the Christians who wait for the heavenly Jerusalem.

Ishmael *persecuted Isaac* and Abraham sent him away. This means: the inadequately converted Jews are disturbing the Galatians; the Church, then, has to send them away.

1Thes
2:11;
1Cor
4:15;
Phlm
1:10

Gen
16:15

Gen
17:16

Jn 8:36

5 • ¹Christ freed us to make us really free. So remain firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery. ²I, Paul, say this to you: if you receive circumcision, Christ can no longer help you. ³Once more I say to whoever receives circumcision: you are now bound to keep the whole Law. ⁴All you who pretend to become righteous through the observance of the Law have separated yourselves from Christ and have fallen away from grace.

Rom 2:25;
Jas 2:10

⁵As for us, through the Spirit and faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. ⁶In Christ Jesus it is irrelevant whether we be circumcised or not; what matters is faith working through love.

1Cor 7:19;
Jas 2:14;
1Cor 13:13

⁷You had begun your race well, who then hindered you on the way? Why did you stop obeying the truth? ⁸This was not in obedience to God who calls you: ⁹in fact, a little leaven is affecting the whole of you. ¹⁰I am

1Cor 5:6

personally convinced that you will not go astray, but the one who confuses you, whoever he may be, shall receive punishment.

¹¹I myself, brothers, could I not preach circumcision? Then I would no longer be persecuted. But where would be the scandal of the cross? ¹²Would that those who confuse would castrate themselves!

1Cor 1:23

Phil 3:2

True freedom

• ¹³You, brothers and sisters, were called to enjoy freedom; I am not speaking of that freedom which gives free rein to the desires of the flesh, but of that which makes you slaves of one another through love. ¹⁴For the whole Law is summed up in this sentence: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.* ¹⁵But if you bite and tear each other to pieces, be careful lest you all perish.

Rom 6:15;
1P 2:16Lev 19:18;
Mk 12:31

¹⁶Therefore I say to you: walk according to the Spirit and do not give

Rom 8:5

• **5.1** Paul does not want converts to be circumcised. See how firmly he speaks to them: this would be a *falling away from grace*. Why? It was not a sin, Paul could well have tolerated without encouraging it.

Yet for Paul, you cannot preach the Gospel in an authentic way without taking stances that upset others. Again "the truth of the Gospel" is not only in the formulas of dogma: it is also in the stand you take, showing how free we are. If the Gospel is liberation, the apostles should adopt, at least on certain points, positions that disturb and shock. Jesus gave an example in violating the holiest of laws, that of the Sabbath, when it was not necessary to do so.

Such is the necessary *scandal* in all Christian behavior, which will never be as scandalous as was Jesus' death on a cross (see 1 Cor 1:17). To save people means, somehow, making them discover who they are before God, and then bringing them to confront the forces that have kept them subjugated and alienated. This is why Paul was so opposed to perpetuating Jewish practices. Following Paul, we could ask in our days: Who are those who give in to prejudices and alienating powers, and who are the persecuted (5:11; 6:12)? Of-

tentimes, the Gospel is lived more authentically in Christian groups that are politically aware and active than in groups that limit themselves to liturgical practices.

• 13. If the Galatians are looking out for religious practices it is partly because they feel that faith should be expressed in a concrete way. Here Paul tells them: if you are anxious for putting faith into life, look at your community life. We, like them, are terribly accustomed to a double life: on one hand we proclaim we are children of God, we speak of grace, of spiritual life, while we are terribly ordinary, often very dishonest and malicious in daily life or with our rivals within the Church, especially if we have a title to defend.

Paul rightly gives a short list of the *works* of the flesh and another of the *fruits* of the Spirit. He places side by side idolatry and the ambitions or divisions so common in religious and practicing groups. It is clear that for him *flesh* and *spirit* are not the same as "body" and "soul": the pettiness and attachment to our privileges are also sins of the flesh, that is of people alien to the Spirit (see commentary on 3:3 and Rom 7:16).

way to the desires of the flesh! ¹⁷For the desires of the flesh war against the spirit, and the desires of the spirit are opposed to the flesh. Both are in conflict with each other, so that you cannot do everything you would like. ¹⁸But when you are led by the Spirit you are not under the Law.

Rom
1:29

¹⁹You know what comes from the flesh: fornication, impurity and shamelessness, ²⁰idol worship and sorcery, hatred, jealousy and violence, anger, ambition, division, factions, ²¹and envy, drunkenness, orgies and the like. I again say to you what I have already said: those who do these things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.

Eph 5:9;
2Cor 6:6;
1Cor
13:4

1Jn 4:17

Col 3:3;
1P 2:11

²²But the fruit of the Spirit is charity, joy and peace, patience, understanding of others, kindness and fidelity, ²³gentleness and self-control. For such things there is no Law or punishment. ²⁴Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its vices and desires.

Phil 2:3

²⁵If we live by the Spirit, let us live in a spiritual way. ²⁶Let us not be conceited; let there be no rivalry or envy of one another.

Various counsels

Mt 18:15;
2Thes
3:14;
Jas 5:19

6 ¹Brethren, in the event of someone falling into a sin, you who are spiritual shall set him aright with the

spirit of kindness. Take care for you, too, may be tempted. ²Carry each other's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. ³If anyone thinks he is something, when in fact he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴Let each one examine his own conduct and boast for himself, if he wants to do so, but not before others. ⁵In this, let each one carry his own things.

Jn 13:34

1Cor
3:18;
4:7

⁶He who receives the teaching of the Word ought to share the good things he has with the one who instructs him. ⁷Do not be fooled. God cannot be deceived. You reap what you sow. ⁸The person who sows for the benefit of his own flesh shall reap corruption and death from the flesh. He who sows in the spirit shall reap eternal life from the Spirit. ⁹Let us do good without being discouraged; in due time we shall reap the reward of our constancy. ¹⁰So while there is time, let us do good to all and especially to our family in the faith.

1Cor
9:11;
Rom
15:27

Pro 22:8;
2Cor 8:6;
1Cor
15:35

1Thes
5:15

I am crucified with Christ

• ¹¹See these large letters I use when I write to you in my own hand!

1Cor
16:21;
Col 4:18

¹²Those who are most anxious to put a good show in life are trying to persuade you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of

• **6.11** At the moment of saying good-bye, once again Paul speaks about the crisis in the community. It is not only a problem of religious practice; there are also certain persons anxious to put up a good show in life (see Phil 3:2-11).

Those who persuade you to be circumcised: they are members of the community. They want to be different from "ordinary" Christians, forming an apparently more serious group, more religious because of being circumcised. Actually, this rite would assure them a welcome to Jewish homes—a good way of making professional contacts. Already at that time the links uniting Jewish communities es-

tablished in all the cities of the Roman Empire increased their possibilities. For those middle class people it was advantageous to rely on them. Paul instead chose to break up and he was to be persecuted from city to city till the moment in which his adversaries would have him condemned by imperial justice.

The world has been crucified to me. Paul has chosen a different way. He goes on his way, without a home, persecuted by some, despised by others, feared by those who cannot stand his example of complete abnegation, nor his mingling with so many people whom they consider inferior. This is to follow Christ to the cross.

Mt 23:15 Christ. ¹³Not for being circumcised do they observe the Law: what interests them is the external rite. What a boast for them if they had you circumcised!

2:19;
2Cor
12:9 ¹⁴For me, I do not wish to take pride in anything except in the cross of Christ Jesus our Lord. Through him the world has been crucified to me and I to the world.

2Cor
5:17;
Eph 4:24 ¹⁵Let us no longer speak of the

circumcised and of non-Jews, but of a new creation. ¹⁶Let those who live according to this rule receive peace and mercy: they are the Israel of God! ¹⁷Let no one trouble me any longer: for my part, I bear in my body the marks of Jesus.

¹⁸May the grace of Christ Jesus our Lord be with your spirit brothers and sisters. Amen.

2Cor
11:23

Phil 4:23