

**A Sole Standard**  
**June 17, 2007**

***Rev. Broadbent:***

Does this happen to you? You hear a passage like this from Paul, and you kind of nod along with it, but really inside, you are going, “Huh?” And then you think, “Well I need to read this through a few times to understand what it might be saying.” And so you do, and you still think, “What?” Well, I hope I can shed a little bit of light on this passage, because I actually think it is quite a beautiful passage, as perplexing or arcane it might seem at the first hearing.

How many of you have figured out by now that there are some e-mail communications that are appropriate, and other things that really should not be communicated by e-mail? How many of you agree with that? Okay, most people. Okay.

E-mail, I have found, is really good for information sharing, reminders, a brief hello, very surface kind of communication. E-mail is not a very good medium for communication when it comes to expressing emotions, especially difficult emotions. And as many times as I have reminded myself this, I am still falling into the trap of being frustrated or perplexed or angry about something and e-mailing back and sending it and then thinking, “Oh, I wish I could reel that back in. I wish I could let that sit for a day, read it again, or just delete it and e-mail back, Can I talk to you sometime?” Because what we miss out, of course, is the body language, responding to where that person is in the space at the moment that we are saying it. They can read our body language about what we are trying to tell them. And none of that is available to us in e-mail. So, so often, when we are frustrated or critical, it comes across in the worst possible way when we try to communicate that via e-mail.

Well, my point in bringing this up is that Galatians is one of those letters of Paul where he is expressing his frustration and anger. And if it were in an e-mail age, it probably would have been even more severe. Paul probably would have sent this and then thought, “Wooo, I probably could have put that a little bit more delicately.” But as it was, in the time of Paul, letters were not so much a place to chit-chat and fill someone in on the goings on of your life, but rather the exact medium by which to express theological concerns in quite well-thought out, articulated ways with people who lived far, far away. They were written not just as a chit-chat letter. In fact, not as chit-chat letters but as theological treatises, and they were written to a formed community, the community which was receiving the letter.

Well, why is Paul so angry? He is angry because he perceives in the church at Galatia a double standard. The two primary leaders in the early church were Paul and Peter. Paul and Peter. Peter, who mostly centered his ministry around Jerusalem, but who also began to make trips into the Gentile world, mostly on

**A Sole Standard**  
**June 17, 2007**

the border of the Jewish Gentile world. Paul, who was also Jewish by origin, but who made much more extensive trips.

Peter initially started to come around. He started to realize – if this new movement that we are creating is going to really take off, we, we Jews, who received this revelation, who experienced this relationship with Jesus the Christ, are going to have to let go of some of our laws that keep us separated from the Gentile world. Most specifically laws around eating – with whom you could eat, what sort of food you could eat, and how the food was prepared.

Well, Peter, initially, showed some courage in eating with Gentiles and overcoming that boundary that was between those two persons. But now Paul is becoming aware that in the churches of Galatia the leaders are, in some cases, eating with the Gentiles, probably when there are mostly Gentiles there, and in other cases, not eating with the Gentiles, but, in fact, creating a situation where there are kind of the real Christians and then there are the half-Christians. The real Christians being those who followed the Law of Torah and accepted Christ, and the half-Christians being those who were not even welcomed into the law and who accepted Christ.

Paul wants to create a sole standard, and that is what he is talking about in these verses. We, ourselves – Peter, you, and I, are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners. He uses that phrase because that is the phrase that the Law would use. Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the Law but through faith in Jesus Christ.

What we hear sometimes as being a very negative and exclusive kind of passage, faith in Jesus Christ alone was actually intended by Paul, at the time of this writing, to convict a divided community that had two different levels of participation, that there is only one sole standard for belonging in the church, and that is faith in Christ Jesus.

We have come to believe in Christ Jesus so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, not by doing the works of the Law, because no one will be justified by the works of the Law.

And then this interesting phrase, “But if in our effort to be justified in Christ, we ourselves have been found to be sinners” – his point is now that if you have the double standard, the standard of the works of the Law and of faith, then there are some people who are in and some people who are out. And so those who are not practicing the works of the Law are thereby sinning in the definition of the Torah, and then Christ becomes, as he says, the occasion, or the servant of sin.

## **A Sole Standard**

**June 17, 2007**

Next, he says that is certainly not the case, but if I build up again the very things that I once tore down, if I all of a sudden start insisting that there are these rules that we must live by, these laws that we must live by, then I demonstrate that I am a transgressor. I know, maybe I'm not totally making this crystal clear. Let me return to my point that for Paul, faith in Christ Jesus is what then unifies the people. And what threatens to tear it apart are the re-institution of former laws and regulations.

“Through the Law, I die to the Law, so that I might live to God. I had been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

As we read this today, it can provide us some important insight on the question, “What is the purpose and the nature of the Church?” That is a big question. Let me suggest that the purpose and the nature of the Church is not to fortify an institution. It may include having a beautiful and spiritual space to meet in, like this, but that is not the nature and the purpose of the Church. The nature and the purpose of the Church, I think, we can read in what Paul says about what faith in Christ Jesus means to him. He says, “Christ loves me. And Christ gave himself up for me.” And so the Church is where we come, is when we come, is how we come, to remind ourselves and to let other people know that in Christ God loves you. Not by any doing of your own. Not by any merit, not by any work of the Law, not by any charity, but just as you are, right now, even with the critical messages or the wonderments or the “What is this minister talking about?” You do not need to understand that. All I want you to understand is Christ loves you, before you did anything, in spite of anything you do, now, always. And we come together because there are some people, sometimes I am that people, sometimes you are that people, who forget that – forget that you are loved.

The Church is not a group of baptized, and therefore, saved people who can get together and pat each other on the back, because we are going to the “right” place. I would actually say that is the opposite of the Church. The Church is where people know they are broken, but also where they know they are loved. It is where they come to create the circumstance where the Church might actually have a chance of happening.

See, the Church is not a fixed entity. The Church is an event, and we see it in flashes, in glances. One time recently I saw it was at the Spring Out Loud Colorado Springs Men's Chorus concert that happened in this very place. I was seated right about here, and we were watching the choir sing. They were all in the different colored shirts, and they were singing their hearts out. I realized that some of them had tears in their eyes. I looked around, and others' cheeks were wet. I wondered about that, and having heard stories, I know that some

## A Sole Standard

June 17, 2007

wept because they thought they would never step into a church for any reason, ever again. It was only a Gay Men's Chorus that would have prompted them to do so.

There were parents and brothers and children and friends and coworkers out here, having a new humanity of the person that they knew and loved be open to them as these men sang to them. Some of the men who were singing received an affirmation that they had never received before. The fact that it happened in this church, I think, was no mistake. The reason I was crying, because I have given my life to this crazy institution, was because in that moment I caught a glimpse. I sat there, and I thought, "That's it. That's it. That right there. That's the church."

See, we are not always the church. We are a worldly institution, and we fall short so often. But we come together nonetheless, so that we might create the context, the environment. So we might till the soil here so that the church that Christ loved might just have a chance of happening. So that our eyes might just be open wide enough to see it, even if just for that moment.

As we celebrate the UCC at 50, we not only ask about the nature and purpose of the church but of a denomination. Denominations are not in great favor right now. Non-denominational seems to be such a thing that you, if you are non-denominational, kind of wear. "Oh, no, we are non-denomination." I have gotten that before. "So is this a non-denominational church?" "No, no, it's denominational. It's very denominational."

Why a denomination? It is not because of this. It is not because any one of these denominations is the final form of the church. It is because we are all temporary forms; and together, as churches in covenant with one another, we again want to create the circumstances by which the church just might be glimpsed by the world. That in being glimpsed, people might hope. That in hoping, people might just trust that they are loved and that they, and we, can do nothing, no work of ours, can earn this, make us more worthy, make us more loveable or acceptable. We need to only trust it. In the Church, we call that "trusting in Christ Jesus."

Amen.