

Talk about shaking the foundations! Here is how The Message translates a portion of our Galatian passage, "*We Jews know that we have no advantage of birth over 'non-Jewish' Christians.*" This is like saying that we Americans have no birth advantage over those non-American born sinners in the eyes of God. Whoops! Wait! It is true, birthplace, status, rank or privilege is not considered in God's Kingdom. Like Job, our only hope is in God's grace or God's vindication. These are shocking words for those who seek such privileges through wealth, rank or birth status.

Faith's hope is that Christ died for all. However, the world's view is still one of privilege, status and birthrights. We have all heard, "He who has the most toys wins." In many parts of the world birth class or status still determines one's status in the community. Bloodlines are more important than accomplishments. It was not long ago that there was racial discrimination in this country. You were judged simply by the color of your skin. Growing up in the north and traveling as a teen-ager to the south in the 1950's was a cultural shock to me. I had never seen a sign that read "whites only". I did not know what to think and did not understand such separations.

In essence this is what Paul is confronting with the early church. There are those who want to make the non-Jewish Christians into Jews before they can become a part of the Church. No love of God. No inclusive view of who God is. God's world was restricted to those who are just like us. Thus, to be a part of who we are you have to become like us. I am not sure we have moved far from this in the 21st Century.

And there were the rules and regulations, the keeping of the Law. Religious rules and regulations dictated their daily lives. It was supposed to define everything they did. There were laws that no one could actually keep. They were broken daily. I mean, you probably broke some law just coming here today. You may not have known it but... here are some current Washington State Laws (according to the internet they are still on the books.)

- It is illegal to be in public with a common cold.
- You may not buy a mattress or any type of meat on Sunday.
- It is mandatory for a motorist with criminal intent to stop at the city limits and call the chief of police that you are entering the town.
- All motor vehicles must be preceded by a man carrying a red flag (day time) or a red lantern (night) fifty feet in front of said vehicle.

The Message reads, "*We tried it—we had the best system of rules the world has ever known.*" They didn't work—they failed to keep them—that is why Christ came.

Our faith and hope today rest not in the keeping of rules and regulations but in Christ. We couldn't and cannot keep the Law. Rather than Law, grace, love and forgiveness must become our standard. Christ alone is faith's hope.

But, we like rules and regulations. Paul is telling the congregation in Galatia that there is a danger. The danger is in reverting back to the past, to the rules and regulations for controlling lives. We are good at making rules. Some have made new rules for inclusion into God's kingdom that are even more imposing than the original ones. Their list may even be longer and more complicated than the original

one. We know you are like us if you follow our rules. Freedom is only a concept—it means you are free to follow our rules. This is how we decide who can and cannot be one of us. Break the rules and out you go.

Yes, societies need some structure. This is not what Paul is talking about. He knows that we live together and in doing so some structure is needed. Doesn't Paul claim his status as a Roman citizen? Paul is referring to our salvation. He is talking of God's grace and forgiveness. His being a Roman citizen has no relevance in God's kingdom. Yet, we want to say, "you are saved if..." We need to have some guidelines so that we know who is in and who is out. We find it hard to leave that decision up to God. We want our say into who is in and who is out.

I spent some time with our missionary Walt White in the Philippines. We had invited Walt to come and lead a series of workshops on how to minister to the growing Muslim community. As he and I traveled around and did the workshops we were always confronted with one question, "When is it okay for a Muslim to eat pork?" To which Walt would respond, "Why do they have to eat pork?" The response would usually be something like, "So that we will know they are really a Christian." To which Walt would respond, "Did Jesus ever eat pork?"

It is not diet or following certain rules and regulations that make us Christian. This is what Paul is fighting against. There is the notion that you have to become like us before you can be one of Christ's followers. We want to make clones rather than disciples.

This is not what Paul wants for the Galatian congregation, nor for us. Faith's hope is in God's grace and forgiveness. We need to see things through God's eyes of grace and forgiveness. As we live by faith our hope is in God's promises to do what God has promised. Our faith and hope is in the fulfillment of those promises. It is not through the keeping of rules and regulations. It is by becoming like someone else...it is by God's love through Jesus.

Jürgen Moltmann came to Christ in an English prison camp. He writes, "I began to understand the assailed Christ...who takes the prisoners with him on his way to resurrection. I began to summon up the courage to live again, seized by a great hope."

Moltmann's hope is reflected in a recent issue of Seattle Pacific University's magazine, *Response*. They look at Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. In one article Douglas Koskela sums up Moltmann's hope, "Hope is the active expectation that God will heal and transform the world. Hope does not mean the denial of suffering or injustice, nor does it mean human beings are able to heal creation apart from God's empowerment. Rather, hope is based in what God has promised to do in the future, and it calls us to witness to those promises in actions of healing and justice in the present. When we are tempted to lose heart because of all we see in the present, we are called to remember the future that God has promised and press forward in hope."

Faith's hope is not in keeping laws, rules or regulations. Nor is it in becoming like someone else. Faith's hope is living in light of the eternal promises of God...grace, love and forgiveness offered freely through Jesus Christ.

Koskela, Douglas, "Remembering the Future", *Response*, Spring 2008 (p.11)