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One in the Messiah

Galatians 3:15-29

Fr. William Klock

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When my grandmother died there was a will. It spelled out everything in black and white. Not just the financial stuff, but even her car, the furniture in her house, down to the tchotchkes on the end tables. Still, one of my twenty-one cousins decided to argue about it. He was going to take the estate to court and dispute the will. One of my uncles shut him down. Not only was he getting a fair share just like everyone else, Grandma made sure her wishes for *everything* were in black and white.

This is Paul's appeal as we move on to the second half of Galatians 3. Paul's going to say, it's all here—plain as day, in black and white. There's nothing to argue about. But these agitators in Galatia, these "people from James" in Antioch—they're like that cousin, unhappy with the will, and trying to get what he wants by saying, "No, no. That can't be right. That's not what Grandma would have wanted." And what they want is circumcision. Remember the situation. Most of the believers in Galatia were gentiles. They had been pagans. They took part in all the pagan practices that were woven all through daily life in the Greco-Roman world. But then they heard the good news about Jesus, they believed, and that meant withdrawing from all those pagan practices. They threw out their household gods. They stopped taking part in the pagan festivals. They stopped visiting the temples and worshipping Caesar. And now their neighbours and coworkers and even the city officials think they're irreligious and unpatriotic. If something bad happens, everyone will come after them for angering the gods.

So these gentiles Christians have claimed the Jewish exemption. Jews were exempt from all those pagan aspects of daily life and since following Jesus was a new way of following the God of Israel, it was an easy out. But the local Jews got angry. If you're not circumcised and don't live by *torah*, you have no business calling yourself a Jew! And then these agitators who were preaching a false gospel of Jesus plus *torah*—or at least Jesus plus circumcision—they showed up and took this as an opportunity to convert the Galatian believers over to their way of thinking. The end result was that they were dividing the church. Instead of Jewish and gentile believers worshipping and praying and fellowshiping and gathering around the Lord's Table together, they were dividing up—as if instead of one body, Jesus now had two.

So Paul continues on in Galatians 3:15. Here's what he writes:

Brothers and Sisters, let me use a human illustration: When someone makes a covenanted will, nobody sets it aside or adds to it.

It's there, like Grandma's wishes, all in black and white with her signature at the bottom. You can't dispute it saying, "No, but Grandma wanted *this* instead." Here the really important thing is who the beneficiary is.

Well [Paul goes on] the promises were made "to Abraham and his seed"—that is, his family. It doesn't say "his seeds," as though referring to several families, but indicates a single family by saying "and to your seed," meaning the Messiah.

Remember the promise made to Abraham. Even though he was a childless old man, he would have a family with children as numerous as the stars, a family that would bless and eventually inherit the nations. And what Paul is stressing here is that there's only one family that inherits that promise. Quoting the Greek

version of Genesis 15:18, Paul uses the word "seed". The promises were made to Abraham and his seed—to his offspring, to his descendants who were yet to be born. Don't think of "seed" as a single seed you might plant in the ground. Think of it in terms of the family that grows from that seed. God's promises were made to that single family, but Paul also stresses what even the circumcision people would have known: that family has come to be represented by the Messiah. Remember, too, that the king represents his people. So Jesus the Messiah and his people are the inheritors of God's promises to Abraham. Now, Paul goes on in verse 17:

This is what I mean: God made this covenanted will; *torah*—the law—which came four hundred and thirty years later, can't undermine it and make the promises null and void. If the inheritance came through the law, it would no longer be by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise.

The circumcision people have been saying that if you want to be a real Christian, you have to at least get circumcised. They probably wanted people to live by other parts of *torah* too, but it starts with circumcision. And Paul's saying, "Look, God established a covenant with Abraham on the basis of faith. Circumcision came years later. And *torah*? The Lord gave that to Israel four hundred and thirty years later after he delivered them from Egypt. And when the Lord gave them *torah*, remember that they were already becoming the great family he had promised to Abraham in the beginning." *Torah* was a big deal, but even something as important as *torah* couldn't rewrite the covenant that the Lord had made with Abraham on the basis of *faith*. When the Lord appeared as a smoking pot and burning torch that night to Abraham, when he passed back and forth down the pathway Abraham had made between the halved carcasses of those sacrificial animals, the Lord had—so

to speak—put it all down in black and white and signed it at the bottom. Whatever else would come later, none of it could or would—nothing on earth or in heaven—could change the terms of his covenant with Abraham and his family. So *torah*—the law—cannot be the thing that defines the people of the Messiah. Like Abraham, their faith is what defines them, what includes them in the covenant family and marks them out as different from the rest of the human race.

But what about the law then? If Christians down through history have struggled with what to do with *torah* we can only imagine how those first Jewish believers would struggle with it. It's not hard to see how Jewish believers would go down this path of Jesus plus *torah*. Because *torah* is what set apart the Jewish people from all the other peoples. *Torah* is why the pagans thought the Jews were weird and *torah* was why the Jews thought they were better than everyone else. God had given it to them and God had commanded them to live by it. He'd even promised blessing if they did and cursing if they didn't. So Paul anticipates their question: If faith is the basis of the covenant, not *torah*, not the law, then where does *torah* fit into all of this? Is Paul saying that *torah* is bad? Look at verse 19:

Why then the law?

Why indeed? And Paul writes:

It was added because of transgressions, until the family should come to whom it had been promised. It was laid down by angels, at the hand of a mediator. He, however, is not the mediator of the “one”—but God is one!

God's purpose in calling Abraham and his purpose in giving him a family was to save the world from sin. Remember that the story that comes just before the calling of Abraham is the Tower of Babel. The point of the Tower of

Babel story is to show how the whole human race had lost the knowledge of God and was lost in darkness. God then speaks to Abraham, calls him out of darkness and idolatry and thus begins the long story of redemption. Through Abraham's family, God would save the human race. But there was a problem. Abraham's family, Israel, was infected by the same disease of sin as everyone else, so God had to do something to preserve this special family until his promises were fulfilled through them. *Torah*—the law—was that something. It wasn't a bad thing at all—which is what some people might have thought Paul was saying. Instead, *torah* was a good thing. In fact, Paul stresses, it was laid down by angels at the hand of a mediator. The mediator is Moses and he didn't make it up. It came to him by angels, which is Paul's somewhat roundabout way of saying that it ultimately came from God. So *torah* wasn't bad. It was wonderful and holy. Think about Moses, coming down Mt. Sinai carrying the law carved on stone and his face literally glowing with the glory of God that he'd seen. *Torah* was good. But neither this mediator—that means Moses—not the law he delivered could bring the “one”—that one family promised to Abraham. Moses and the *torah* had a different job to do—a vitally important job, but still a temporary job—until the time was right for God to fulfil his promises in that one family of the Messiah.

So what was the job of *torah*? Paul says it was added because of transgressions. What does that mean? Well, “transgression” means to break the law. It's more specific than “sin”. “Sin” is general. It means to fall short. So while the rest of humanity stumbled around in its rebellion against God, God gave Israel a law so that the people's sins could be turned into trespass—so that they could see that they weren't just stumbling around in the dark. *Torah* showed them that their sin was really deadly disobedience. *Torah* prepared the

people who carried the promise for the day when the Messiah would bring that promise to fulfilment by dealing with sin on the cross. Through *torah*, God deliberately created a logjam in the river of blessing. *Torah* exposed sin for what it really is so that the Messiah could then deal with it.

Think of a rocket being shot off into space. It has to have an incredible amount of force to push against earth's gravity and that means it has to have a massive booster rocket full of fuel to create that force. That giant booster lifts the rocket into space, but once the rocket is in space, the astronauts flip a switch and they let go of the booster so it can fall back to earth. The space capsule doesn't jettison the booster rocket because it was bad. Without it, they'd never have got into space. They jettison it because it's no longer needed. It's a good thing and its job is now done. *Torah* is like that.

So, Paul asks in verse 21:

Is *torah*—the law— against God's promises? Of course not! No, if a law had been given that could have given life, then covenant membership really would have been by the law. But the scriptures shut up everything together under the power of sin, so that the promise—which comes by the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah—should be given to those who believe.

So Paul's saying, “Okay. If—and the stress is on *if*—a law had been given that could give life, *if* that had happened, then being part of that covenant would indeed have been by that law.” Life is the goal. God wants to set the human race to rights. But that's not what *torah* did. Again, what *torah* did was expose sin for what it really is: deadly rebellion against God. *Torah* didn't give life. Just the opposite. It showed that humanity is enslaved to sin and that apart from God's reconciling grace we stand condemned. Life, Paul stresses, comes through the faithfulness of

Jesus the Messiah. Paul rams the point home here: If you go back to *torah*, you're going to end up back in jail. The way forward is through faith in the Messiah.

If this isn't clear enough, Paul puts it another way starting in verses 23:

Before this faithfulness arrived [that's the faithfulness of the Messiah he just mentioned] **we were kept under guard by *torah*, in close confinement until the coming faithfulness should be revealed. Thus *torah* was like a babysitter for us, looking after us until the coming of the Messiah, so that we might be given covenant membership on the basis of faithfulness.**

Before Jesus, Israel was like a child and *torah* was the babysitter. In Paul's world rich people would have slaves who looked after their children, taking them to and from school and generally keeping them out of trouble. So between Moses and Jesus, this is what *torah* did for Israel. But at some point kids grow up and they don't need a babysitter anymore. The sign that Israel had grown up was "faithfulness". Specifically, the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah. He came and did what Israel had struggled and failed to do all through their history. Jesus is finally the one faithful Israelite. That makes him the fulfilment of God's promises to Abraham. But there are two sides to his faithfulness. Believers answer the faithfulness of Jesus with faith of our own and it is this faith—not *torah*—it is this faith in response to Jesus' faithfulness, that marks out the mature family of God. Jesus plus nothing. Jesus, as the faithful Israelites, opens up Abraham's family to everyone regardless of ethnicity or language or sex or class or anything else. He writes in verse 25:

But now that the faithfulness has come, we are no longer under the rule of the babysitter. For you are

all sons of God, through faith, in the Messiah, Jesus.

"Sons of God". That's language—that's a *title*—right out of the exodus story. In Exodus 4, when the Lord tells Moses to go to Pharaoh, he calls Israel his "firstborn son". What Paul is doing here is shifting the frame of reference. He's been talking about Israel between Moses and Jesus as a time when Israel was a child, guarded by a babysitter, and waiting for the promises of Abraham to be fulfilled. Now, when he talks about being sons of God through faith in the Messiah, what he's saying is that that time from Moses to Jesus was really like the years that Israel spent as slaves in Egypt. In Jesus the time of rescue has come. Paul is saying to the circumcision people: Do you want to go back to being a child, when you could be a grown-up? Do you want to go back to being a slave, when you could be free? If you want to be grown-up Israel, the thing that marks you out is faith, is trust in the Messiah.

But Paul doesn't leave it there. In verses 27-29 he hammers home this point of inclusion in the Messiah. Five times he uses this word Messiah with relation to our identity. If you're following along, most of your translations probably say "Christ". *Christos* is the Greek word and for reasons I don't fully understand, Christians have usually left it untranslated. The result is that "Christ" has lost its punch. We say it like it's Jesus last name. Some people even think it is Jesus' last name. In fact, "Christ" is just Greek for "Messiah". It's not a name; it's Jesus' title. He's God's anointed King. And so some years ago I decided that unless there was good reason to do otherwise, I was going to translate *Christos* as "Messiah" in my preaching. It's vitally important we understand who Jesus is. Paul doesn't talk about being "in Jesus". He talks all the time about being "in the Messiah" and that's because it's Jesus' messiahship that makes him able to

represent us as the people of God. So here, Paul hammers it home writing:

You see, every one of you who has been baptised into the Messiah has put on the Messiah. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer "male and female". You are all one in the Messiah, Jesus. And, if you belong to the Messiah, you are Abraham's family. You stand to inherit the promise.

The Messiah embodies faithful, grown-up Israel. The Messiah embodies the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham. So what's important, Paul says, is that we are "in" the Messiah. But what does that mean? Modern people often seem to think of it as some kind of experience, but for Paul and his readers in the First Century, it meant being part of this royal family of which Jesus is the King—the Messiah. And, Paul says, as much as faith in Jesus is the thing that marks this family out as being in the Messiah, baptism is the entrance.

This is another thing we might misunderstand. A lot of modern people, especially in our Protestant tradition, will say, "But isn't baptism a 'work' and if we enter into the Messiah by a 'work', how is it by faith?" Again, like everything else, we need to see baptism in light of the story. Paul doesn't elaborate here, because it was a given believers back then would think of it this way. Think of the exodus and think of Israel at the Red Sea as the Lord parted the waters and made a pathway through to a new life of freedom and a new life in his presence. On one side of the parted sea was a life of slavery and on the other side was a promise of life with God—the fulfilment of his promises. But to get from one side to the other meant passing through the water. Passing through meant faith, it meant trusting the Lord and his offer of rescue from slavery. Brothers and Sisters, baptism is like that. On one side we are slaves to sin and on the

other is the Spirit-filled life of the Messiah's family. The font stands between like the Red Sea. In the waters God makes his promise and leads us through to life on the other side.

So to pass through the waters of baptism is take the first step of faith in the faithfulness of Jesus the Messiah. To pass through the waters of baptism is to put off the old self and to put on the Messiah. And when we do that, his identity becomes ours. That's not to say that everything about our previous identity becomes completely irrelevant, but it does mean that nothing about our old selves has to do with our standing in the Messiah's family. Jew or gentile, slave or free, man or woman, we all stand on equal footing if we are in the Messiah's family. We come to one Table. We eat one bread. We drink of one cup. Because, as Paul hammers home his last blow: "If you belong to the Messiah, you are Abraham's family and you stand to inherit the promise.

There's no reason to look for anything else to enhance that status, because there is nothing else that can. We are one in Jesus because God has been faithful to his promises. He put it in black and white, he affixed his signature that night when he met Abraham as the smoking pot and burning torch and he fulfilled that promise when Jesus was born of Mary, when Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate, when Jesus rose again on the third day—and he continues to fulfil his promises in us. Every time someone is baptised into the Messiah's family, every time God pours out his Spirit, every time he brings us together at his Table on the basis of the faithfulness of Jesus, he fulfils his promises.

Brothers and Sisters, if we are passionate about Jesus and if we're passionate about the gospel, we should be just as passionate about the unity of the family—the church. This is one of the reasons I am a Reformed

Episcopalian. Bishop Cummins understood this and that's why—unlike other Anglicans of his day who required episcopal confirmation in order to come to the Lord's Table—we welcome everyone who is baptised into Jesus the Messiah. Because we know that all who are in the Messiah are part of the one family of Abraham. Because we know that our unity is a testimony to the faithfulness of the Father, revealed in Jesus and the Spirit. Because our being brought together in the Messiah—Jew and gentile, slave and free, men and women—is a powerful witness of the life and light of God's new age that needs to be shined into this dark and divided world.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, through faith in the faithfulness of your Son, you have made us your people. Remind us always that faith in Jesus makes us one, so that we might be as passionate about our unity as you are and so that our unity in Jesus might be a bright gospel light in the midst of the darkness. Amen.