

## INTRODUCTION

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# An Unexpected Problem with Paul

I HAVE NEVER BEEN a traditionalist in the way that most church people understand the word. I have spent the past three decades urging the church to get out of its buildings and into the world. The ancient Celtic monks serve as my heroes because they set out to sea in small boats with neither paddle nor sail, trusting the Wild Goose to guide them along.<sup>1</sup> Wherever they landed became their new home, a place where they created new, gospel-bearing, culturally relevant traditions. I have written about reclaiming the wisdom of the mystics, saints, and martyrs, in part, because they teach us to detach from our death grip on traditions that have taken the place of God.<sup>2</sup>

In my work I have exhorted the church to move away from staid traditionalism into dynamic, spiritually deep yet nimble

expressions of church—the kind that twentieth-century spiritual giants Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Karl Rahner, Thomas Merton, and Henri Nouwen claimed will be necessary for the church to exist in the decades ahead.<sup>3</sup> Bonhoeffer referred to the church of the future as a new kind of monasticism that enfleshes the Sermon on the Mount.

With these prophets and others I believe we must now take up the gospel-shaped movement of Jesus. We must now live

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into a new kind of monasticism, one without walls or cloister, one that has little in common with the old monasticism as Bonhoeffer said, one that finds solidarity with “the least of these” and is accessible to and largely led by laypeople.

A broad grassroots movement is rising—global and God-breathed. It looks much more like original Methodism (in many ways a lay monastic movement) than what passes for church today. It is imperative that the institutional church that is collapsing beneath bureaucratic top heaviness, clergy-centric practice, and ecclesiastic loss of soul live forward into the original vision of Jesus. Indeed, the gospel-shaped church is the only kind that will birth Jesus-followers in the years ahead. What I see emerging in myriad ways and places is precisely that—a gospel-shaped movement.

This conviction drives more than my research, writing, and teaching. During the past several years my husband and I have chosen to live in intentional Christian community, taking

up new monastic rhythms of prayer, hospitality, and justice. I have worked with friends and students to plant diverse experimental communities that serve as contextual laboratories for on-the-ground learning.<sup>4</sup> As more and more people developed an interest in our Missional Wisdom communities, we created training opportunities for them. Whether clergy or laity, increasing numbers of people within the church feel called to develop faith communities beyond the walls of the church. They serve as emerging leaders of what God is sprouting from the cracks in the crumbling foundation of church as we've known it.

The incubation, hatching, and flowering of many missional, new-monastic learning initiatives has filled the past decade.<sup>5</sup> These initiatives help the church move beyond its fearful, clutching, backward-looking stuckness, a malady that the anxious most often describe as “holding on to our tradition.” What they fear losing most assuredly is not universal tradition, ancient tradition, or global tradition. What they call tradition refers primarily to the habitual in their own context—a tradition of sorts but with a small *t*.

## **A Shocking Discovery**

I spend a lot of time thinking about these matters. So imagine my shock one day when I suddenly found myself on the side of Paul's detractors: the Traditionalists. I had begun reading Paul's epistle to the Galatians again as part of my morning prayer. I have read this epistle many times—in Greek and in numerous English translations. I have parsed it, taught it, preached from

it, treasured it. Martin Luther described this book as his lover, his spouse, his Katharina von Bora. It is the book for reformers. It was the book for me.

### **Landing on the Wrong Side**

This day, though, I found Paul annoying. Even more, I felt threatened by his freewheeling words. The idea that Gentiles could be just as close to the God of the Jews without Jewish tradition, that thousands of years of sacred history recalled through precise liturgical practice were unnecessary, that God wasn't particularly Jewish after all, did not seem like good news.<sup>6</sup> It seemed wrong, hurtful, dismissive.

Unbidden, images came to mind of how Paul's original audience might have received his words. These people embraced a religion that was thousands of years old, people who were explicitly persecuted and oppressed by the government for their ancient religious and ethnic identity. Images of Syrian refugees fleeing from ISIS came to mind. My usual missional enthusiasm gave way to a deep sadness that arose from imagining the difficulty of persons who had suffered for their religion to hear that it was not necessary for salvation after all.

The plunge into Paul's fearsome words continued. I felt as if I had fallen into the text and landed in the story on the wrong side. For if I substituted the words *the Gentiles* with current culture's version of Outsiders—everyone who is not “us,” the unchurched, agnostics, spiritual but not religious, fundamentalists, and for some people the LGBTQ community, the

divorced, the ones who have had abortions—Galatians took on an entirely different tone. If I replaced Paul’s Judaism with Insider Christianity or “the church,” everyone who is “us,” everyone who follows our tribe’s rules and rituals; if I substituted Judaism with *my own favorite traditions*—icons, incense, order of evening prayer, silence, anointing oil, pilgrimage—well, now there was real trouble. Those traditions hold meaning for me, shaping my practice of prayer. I have experienced God through them.

I closed the Bible and placed it on the table where I keep my prayer resources—my altar space at home, which is for me a tradition—and considered how to live into this new awareness. I wondered what it meant for who I am and what I do. I wondered, and I prayed.

*What part of the church’s tradition, I asked myself, must be present for a group of Jesus-followers to constitute the church?* The Spirit brought Jesus’ words from Matthew 18 to mind: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (v. 20).

Then I asked, But what does “in his name” really mean? Is it simply a pious phrase to close our prayers, or does it say more about the orientation of our soul? Soon I came to the question that remains the same today as for the Galatians in Paul’s day: *Could it be that Jesus is found in the midst of outsiders who without our usual religious traditions nonetheless bear the gospel?*

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That thought led me to Matthew 25:31-46, the parable of the sheep and goats with its disturbing pronouncement that we find Jesus in the least of these—the vulnerable, suffering, disempowered, and those at the mercy of others. We find Jesus in the all-too-human “traditions” of oppression, suffering, and need. “Yes,” Jesus says through the parable. “I am found beyond the walls of the church; beyond religious programs; beyond rituals, rites, and institutions. Wherever people hunger and thirst, I hunger and thirst. I am out there with the people. I am out there with creation that groans.”

God who is “out there” *with* and *in* the least of these, Jesus who is present whenever even two or three people gather in his orientation of love, trust, compassion, healing, Godwardness—this is the God I had believed in for a long time. But nothing had ever challenged my belief in light of my attachment to my *own* traditions. This Galatians moment brought forth a new set of questions.

If the God of Jesus and Paul were in fact bigger than Moses or Elijah could imagine—more expansive, more inclusive, more salvific—is that same God bigger than we Christians think God is? What does that concept imply for us today as the church struggles with its post-Christendom identity in a thoroughly pluralistic world?

### **Gatekeepers and Lock Pickers**

But the most unsettling question for me that day was this: Why did I suddenly feel like a gatekeeper? Usually I am the person who picks the lock the gatekeeper sets in place. But through

this experience of reading Galatians—rather, having Galatians read *me*, I realized that I too needed a larger vision of God. I had been schooled, for example, in a particular way of reading the Bible that I felt was really the “right” way. But how we read and interpret the Bible comes as part of our theological tradition. The thought entered my mind that my interpretive tradition of scripture had limits, and I acknowledged it as one of several responsible methods. *The canon of scripture itself comes in multiple traditions*, I reasoned, with Catholic and Orthodox versions having many more books than the Protestant Bible. Yet all these receive consideration within the realm of orthodoxy. I asked God to open my heart to greater love and discernment and to grant me wisdom as I returned to the epistle to the Galatians. I had entered what many would describe as liminal space.<sup>7</sup>

This time as I read through Galatians—both from a perspective of “outsiders” who nonetheless bear the spirit of Jesus and with the perspective of persons of our long, revered Christian traditions—it became a convicting text to me. For the very first time I actually heard and felt the epistle’s impact in the way I believe its original audience did. Galatians opened my eyes and heart in a more compassionate way to the deep struggle the church now finds itself in as it is pushed to the margins of society. Day by day as I read each paragraph, wrestling and questioning, Paul convinced me afresh that a great tradition lies behind our traditions. In the words of Revelation 21:5,

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that great tradition is this: God in Christ is making all things new. Day by day I experienced within myself both the traditional church's grief in "forgetting what lies behind," as well as the hope of "straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13) in Christ Jesus. We see the great tradition most clearly in the Gospel narratives in those places where Jesus reveals characteristics of God.

Paul's vision in Galatians does not threaten the true gospel, which proclaims the tradition behind the tradition. It only threatens a church that subsumes the gospel to institutional priorities, doing so in the name of tradition. I took comfort in the Orthodox perspective on God and theology: God is mystery; we cannot know all there is to know about God. What we know now we "see in a mirror, dimly" (1 Cor. 13:12). With Martin Luther, I came to love this Galatians text anew.

Galatians, I saw, could help us Christians now as we navigate the rapid culture shifts in which we find ourselves. We can learn from Paul how to be open to the Holy Spirit who gifts and calls people to apostolic, prophetic, and evangelistic ministry that looks very different from what we in the inherited American church are used to. Rather than polarizing ourselves between "the traditional church" and the other emerging forms of church, we can learn from Paul to honor the revelation (literally "the revealing") of Jesus Christ wherever that happens, especially among marginalized people whom Jesus called "the least of these."<sup>8</sup> We can learn to move beyond the walls of church buildings and programs into our communities to join Jesus who is already there. We can still view the traditions of our denominations as expressions of the body of Christ, but we

can exchange competitive denominationalism for robust participation in God's diverse kingdom.

## Broadening Our Vision

By paying attention to how Paul helped Jewish Christians broaden their vision of God, neighbor, tradition, and mission in the first century, we Christians can broaden our vision of God, neighbor, tradition, and mission today. Paul offers wisdom to help us move beyond fearful and paralyzing questions about racial, sexual, and spiritual "otherness," which flow from our interpretation of tradition. That wisdom will help us ask a better set of questions about what it means to be a "vital church."

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Those unsettling weeks were not easy; God is the divine Disturber of the Peace. I am so grateful for God's attentive care for me as I wrestled from one chapter to the next. I know that God has that same care for the church, which makes it possible for us to wrestle together and find our way forward with wisdom and grace.

This little volume reflects on those weeks of struggling through Paul's epistle to the Galatians. This is not an exegetical tome on the epistle. It is, rather, a collection of essays that offer the missional wisdom of Paul to the church today via a reflective reading of Galatians.

I have included questions for conversation at the end of each chapter with the hope that small groups of friends may read and discuss it together. I offer this book to you, God's beloved church of the early twenty-first century, with deep gratitude for all the ways you have nurtured me and count-

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less others in the way of Jesus. I offer it to you as an act of solidarity with your struggle to find your way when it feels as if someone has pulled the rug out from under your collective feet. And I offer it as contrition for the times when those of us who feel urgency to follow the apostolic way have been less than sensitive to your grief.

May the apostle Paul's fortitude and wisdom guide us as we follow the Christ who makes all things new. The God who made us loves us and will not fail us. The church belongs to God. The church is God's idea, not ours. The diverse forms of the church from one generation to the next, from one culture to the next are God's idea, not ours. Our vocation as the church involves our participation with God so that we can give this world a glimpse into God's great heart of love. To take up our apostolic vocation today we have to come to terms with this reality: The God we love, the God revealed in Christ, is much bigger than we knew. God has never been bound by our theology or our traditions. It is now time for us to see the unbound God.