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# Loving the Tradition behind the Tradition

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission or from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God’s family who are with me, to the churches of Galatia. . . .

—GALATIANS 1:1-2

**T**O UNDERSTAND the radical nature of Paul’s letter to the Galatians, we begin with Paul’s conversion. This is Paul’s method: to invite the church of Galatia to the same journey of spiritual awakening that he has traversed. As he presents his own narrative of coming to know Christ, Paul cites the authority of scripture, tradition, and his experience of the risen Christ.

Note carefully: For Paul, these three sources of authority are not equal. For Paul, Jesus has ultimate authority over life, texts, and traditions—both theological and philosophical. Jesus expresses his authority through who he is and how he lives, dies, and is raised from the dead. We recognize his authority in people like Ananias, who prays for Paul's healing and baptizes him after the Damascus road encounter.<sup>1</sup> While Paul acknowledges the authority of the apostles who followed Jesus before his death, he emphasizes that the risen Christ has called him and speaks to him. And the risen Christ holds ultimate authority. A later chapter will focus more on the question of authority. For now suffice it to say that Paul is a mystic whose direct experience of the risen Christ transforms his life. He now gives himself completely to God's work in the world.<sup>2</sup>

## **A Reinterpretation of Tradition**

In Galatians, which is one of the earliest written documents to become part of our New Testament, Paul offers the reinterpretation of his own cherished and ancient tradition, a new reading of tradition given to him by Jesus:

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel that was proclaimed by me is not of human origin; for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Gal. 1:12).

Throughout the letter to the Galatians, Paul refers to a dynamic relationship with the Holy Spirit, urging the church

to live in the Spirit, be guided by the Spirit, bear the fruit of the Spirit. Over the years of his own pilgrimage with the risen Christ, Paul learns to listen to and cooperate with Jesus through the Holy Spirit.

But you may already be asking, “How can I know that the Holy Spirit is speaking and leading? How could Paul tell that the Spirit was guiding him? How did he *know* it was God and not his own imagination or worse yet, Satan?” We must contend with these questions if we are to open ourselves to Christ as Paul did; so in subsequent chapters we shall consider these questions at some length.

Most of what we know about Paul comes from the epistles he wrote. In several of them he includes autobiographical material. In Galatians 1 Paul refers to the story of his dramatic conversion recorded in Acts 9.

Paul, whose Hebrew name was Saul, was born around 5 CE, making him close to Jesus’ age. He enjoyed Roman citizenship with its benefits and protection, while being born a Jew.<sup>3</sup> He probably came from a well-to-do family. Growing up in the ancient and prosperous city of Tarsus, he received a superb education and became an outstanding young leader among the Pharisees. People noted his zeal in defending Jewish tradition. The Pharisees, one of the three primary sects within Judaism at the time, appear frequently in the Gospel narratives. They are

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known as protectors of tradition, especially the scriptures. In Wesleyan terms we would refer to them as the “scriptural holiness” group within Judaism.

We first meet Paul under his Hebrew name Saul<sup>4</sup> in Acts 7:58, where he is present for the stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr: “Then they dragged him [Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats

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at the feet of a young man named Saul.” We can imagine him standing just out of range of dust and blood, holding the executioners’ garments to keep them tidy. What happens next indicates Saul’s approval of the murder.

A great persecution breaks out straightway after the martyrdom of Stephen, with Saul leading the way. Ironically, though Jesus

has told the disciples to wait for the Holy Spirit who would empower them to be his witnesses around the world, after the Spirit comes, the disciples generally have stayed put. They are still in Jerusalem when the great persecution begins. Acts 8:3 records Saul’s vengeance against the perceived threat of the new sect: “Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison.” Scattered to many places, the persecuted disciples share the gospel as they go. The promise of the Father that they will become a global witness finally moves toward fulfillment but not in a way they would have chosen.

Saul, “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” receives the authority to track down the scattered disciples and bring them back to Jerusalem for prosecution. (Read Acts 9:1-2.) While on his way to Damascus, Saul is suddenly confronted by the risen Christ:

Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” He asked, “Who are you, Lord?” The reply came, “I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.” The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, “Ananias.” He answered, “Here I am, Lord.” The Lord said to him, “Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.” But Ananias answered, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.” But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer

for the sake of my name.” So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength. (Acts 9:3-19)

Saul starts preaching about Christ in Damascus immediately upon his recovery, unsurprising in light of his zealous nature. Before long his former colleagues make an attempt on his life. Never one to shrink from danger, Paul returns to Jerusalem where he finds a friend in Barnabas who welcomes him into the frightened remnant of Jesus-followers, who at this time refer to themselves as the Way. Once again Paul has to flee for his own safety. (See Acts 9:26-30.) The next time Acts mentions Paul at the close of chapter 12 and moving into chapter 13, Barnabas and Paul are commissioned to serve the church together in Antioch. During this time in Antioch, under Barnabas and Paul’s leadership, Jesus’ followers begin to be called Christians, a term of derision that means “little Christs.”

## **The Damascus Road**

As Paul launches into his letter to the Galatians, he describes the ego-shattering Damascus road experience. In a long passage (Gal. 1:11–2:21) he provides a detailed narrative to persuade the Galatians that he has not come into a more expansive theology without great struggle.<sup>5</sup>

Paul states that he was a violent man, advanced beyond others his age in his knowledge and zeal for tradition. (Apparently he follows the violent Shammaite school of thought within the larger Pharisee tradition, carrying out his duty by using any means necessary to suppress theological deviance.) He portrays himself as the ultimate defender of the faith, ruthless in his persecution of Christians.

After his conversion and the brief time in Damascus and Jerusalem, Paul journeys to the wilderness of Arabia. In his time, the wilderness was a vast geographic area southeast of Palestine and, of particular importance, the location of Mount Sinai. On Mount Sinai,

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Moses had received the Law. It was one of the holiest places a devout Hebrew like Paul could go in order to listen to God and come to terms with what has happened.<sup>6</sup> There, over a period of time, he experiences direct revelations from Jesus.

The content of those encounters has radically changed Paul's understanding of his own Jewish tradition. He neither rejects nor disrespects his tradition but comes to see it in a new light. Non-Jews are just as beloved to God as Jews, he realizes. People need not follow all the rituals of the Hebrew tradition to experience God's love and salvation fully. Jesus the Messiah has come for *all* people. The Jews have played a special role in bringing the Messiah into the world for the whole world. All these revelations dismantle what Paul previously thought he knew about God. Paul also understands that persecution

will mark his life, the same kind of trauma he once inflicted on others. In these opening chapters, Paul does not explain how the revelations were given, whether by dream, vision, a visible encounter with the risen Christ, or contemplative awareness. He simply states he received revelations from Jesus Christ.

In the rest of the epistle to the Galatians, Paul argues for the tradition behind his Hebrew tradition. The love of Christ has captured his heart. He has surrendered to Christ's authority. As a result he has given himself completely to God's mission in the world—a mission to everyone. As he says in Galatians 3:28, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." In this, one of the earliest texts in the canon, Paul

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subsumes his own tradition to the deeper, more ancient tradition of God making all things new.

The tradition *behind* the tradition begins in Eden with God's promise of salvation to Adam and Eve. It moves forward with God's promise after the great flood and on to the calling of Abram and Sarai to be a blessing to the whole earth. All of that happens before the Hebrew tradition exists—

long before Moses, the Exodus, or the giving of the Law. The central focus of the Hebrew Bible involves the story of God who is calling forth and creating a people to bless the entire

world. Paul has become an apostle for an apostolic God, not by human choice or even his own human desire but by the call and empowerment of God.<sup>7</sup>

In the next chapter we will reflect more closely on Paul's direct experience of the risen Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We will consider reasons this kind of language and experience may seem foreign or even threatening in our main-line churches. We will think about what we fear in opening ourselves to direct encounters with God such as Paul experienced. Only then can we examine time-tested ways to discern whether a revelation or insight really does come from the Holy Spirit, and we'll begin to explore what might happen if we, like Paul, take seriously what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church today.