

Galatians

In the early church, the ritual of baptism was fairly dramatic. Ancient records indicate that baptism did not happen immediately as a person became involved with the Christian community. It only occurred after a period of time, often between a year to two years, and after the person demonstrated a change in their way of life to a way that demonstrated Christ-like features. In other words, baptism occurred after the person demonstrated a deep response to the grace of Christ by living the way of Christ. This occurred symbolically at the time of baptism, which was often Easter Eve, by taking off one's old clothes and laying them aside, then being baptized, then putting on new clothes. In other words, taking off the old way of life and putting on a new way of life. Throughout the New Testament, the writers will use images like dying to your old self/living to a new self, dying/rising with Christ, putting off the old self/putting on the new self to symbolize the transformative nature of grace celebrated in baptism. The key was that faith meant living a whole new way and baptism claimed that new way for the individual who became a part of the community.

This understanding of the transformative nature of grace, that we have died to an old way of life and live to a new way, is central to Paul's letter to the churches in Galatia. While he does not specifically dwell on baptismal language, the understanding that the grace that we have received through faith in Christ transforms us so that the old life passes away and new life begins is core to Paul's letter. The letter is written to several communities in the region of Galatia and Paul seems to be responding to reports that people are not living fully a gospel, Christ-like, life. It is a letter in which Paul appears imminently frustrated and exasperated, as he breaks with the typical form of the letter and immediately expresses frustration with the Galatians.

In essence, Paul's frustration can be seen as a working out of the statement in Galatians 5:1, "For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery." Christ has set us free to be the people that God created us to be, a people that live fully into the kingdom of God. This is not only possible, but it is the joyful response we are to offer for the amazing gift of freedom we have received, Paul says. Why, he ponders with the Galatians, would anyone who has been set free want to go back to being slaves? Paul understands that without God's grace we are slaves to sin and its utterly destructive power for our lives, our communities and our world. As slaves, we have no choice but to sin, that is live destructively. Yet, grace sets us free from that to live the good that God has shown us. In the terms of the language of baptism we were using before, why would you want to put on your old clothes when you have put on the new ones? For Paul, grace is so transformative that he can hardly imagine not responding to it fully with the living of a Christ-like life. Anything short of that, cheapens the grace and the witness that Christians have been called to offer to the world. Questions about circumcision and about going back to old ways are the particular examples that Paul uses to develop the larger argument about the transformative power of grace to make us new creations.

What does this life transformed by grace look like? Paul describes it with the image of the fruit of the Spirit. God's grace imbued by the Spirit produces a certain way of life in people and that way is characterized by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." (5:23)

