

Christ Formed in You Again

Galatians 4:12-20

Paul has talked a lot about what it means to add the law to faith in order to be right with God. Now he gets personal: what he did, what they did, and what the false teachers are trying to do. Paul wants Christ to be formed in them, and by grace that very thing is happening in us as we read.

Incarnational Ministry

Paul asks the Galatians to become like him because he is like them (v12). He has been attacking, warning, cursing, calling them foolish, wondering if he wasted his time, so he wants them to know that nothing on his part prevents reconciliation. He is not injured (v12). Paul speaks the truth in love, but he also speaks love in love. The flesh enjoys correcting people in order to look down on them, but the Spirit does it seeking their best interest. Paul became a Jew to Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles in order to win them over (1 Cor. 9:20-22). “Incarnational ministry” is often employed today to simply compromise the message at key points, to avoid the necessary offense of the gospel. What it actually means is knowing your audience in order to confront them at key points (Acts 17:23, 28). Paul confronted Jewish sins among the Jews and pagan sins among the pagans, and he preached the gospel in terms they could understand. We need to know the questions people have in order to answer them, which means caring and listening. Paul did this without putting on the first century equivalent of skinny jeans. His appearance was actually really off-putting, but they received him anyway as angel, even as Jesus Himself (vv13-14; Mal. 2:7; Lk. 10:16).

Lasting Love

The Galatians received the message and the man, and would have given their eyes to him (v15). Paul seems to have had problems with his eyes, which may be why he stopped to preach there in the first place (v13). The truth that blessed and caused them to be so selfless toward Paul now makes them count him as an enemy (vv15-16). The false teachers are like a bad suitor who intends to win them over in order to exclude them until they work their way in (v17). They’re signing up for a system that achieves inclusion through works, like a series of spiritual karate belts. Paul’s gospel includes everyone based on the righteousness of Jesus alone. Whenever anyone with faith in Him would be excluded from the church, some functionally false gospel is at work. This happens so frequently because our fleshly pride likes it. If we earn our way in, then we can boast of where we are. But the gospel constantly reminds us, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor. 4:7). Zeal for a good thing is good, but it ought to be consistent, and not just in favor of whoever is there (v18). Zeal in fleshly pride is worse than no zeal at all. Paul confronts their

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shifting loyalties from God, the truth, and him, and he can only do so because his love for them is steadfast.

Labor Pains Again

He calls them “my dear children”, showing the Father-heart of God. Paul compares himself to a mother who has gone into labor again for the same child (v19)! What could be a bitter complaint is instead a tender desire to be with them and put these concerns to rest (v20). We learn that it’s possible for people to become Christians and then take a long and miserable detour away from Christ. When they do, they ought to have Christians like Paul argue, rebuke, plead, love and care for them, ready for birth pains again. Christ is not done with us and therefore we can’t be done with one another until we’re dead. Paul is laboring for Christ to be fully formed in them again, which means He is simultaneously being formed in him. This sort of mess is what we should expect in the church, all kinds of grace-filled trouble that results in our salvation and God’s glory.