GALATIANS

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Why Galatians? Why Now?

Some years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, possibly between 53 and 57, but maybe as early as the late 40s, Paul wrote a letter to a group of Galatian congregations in Anatolia (or Asia Minor), located in present-day Turkey. There are actually two candidates for the designation "Galatia" in the ancient world. Either of them would intersect with what we know of Paul's ministry. Galatia may mean a Roman province of that name located in southern Galatia, established by Augustus in 25 BCE. Alternatively, it may refer to the traditional region of a group of Celtic tribes often called "Galatians," living around Ancyra, Pessinus, and Tavium, who had migrated there in the third century BCE.[1] The latter group is identified with what is often called the "North Galatian" hypothesis.

Several Christian congregations in the Roman province of southern Galatia are mentioned in Acts 16:1–2 (Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe), but it is unclear whether they can be identified with the "Galatians" of our letter. The debate about how to identify the "Galatia" of the epistle has continued for centuries, at many different levels, not all of them geographical. Jerome, for example, derives "Galatians" from the Hebrew *galath,* meaning removed or carried away. This allows him to relate their designation to the "removal" (*translatio*) of the Galatians from the true gospel of Jesus.[2] Luther quotes Jerome and then adds, "Some people think that we Germans

1. Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 34.
2. See Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians,* in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation,* vol. 121, trans. Andrew Cain (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 73.

are descended from the Galatians, and there may be some truth in this." He thinks that, like the Galatians of Paul's epistle, his own German people are ardent in the beginning but soon lose their enthusiasm, and he wishes that they were "steadier and surer."[3]

It is not entirely clear from Galatians itself who exactly the recipients of the letter may have been. This may explain why the sociocultural context of the addressees has sometimes been overlooked in the interpretation of the epistle. Nevertheless, in recent years a number of scholars have underlined the fact that the Galatians were a colonized people living in an imperial context and that this is important to take into account in understanding the epistle. Aliou Cissé Niang, for example, holds that the addressees of Paul's letter, whom he calls Celts/Gauls/Galatians, were "living under imperial/colonial Rome" and were viewed as the "barbaric" others of classic civilization. In this reckoning, the "Galatians" probably were the descendants of ancient Celtic tribes who settled in Anatolia.[4] As such, they would have been touched by the older Phrygian culture in the region (which included worship of Adgistis, the "Mother of the Gods")[5] as well as by wider Hellenistic influences. They would quite possibly also have encountered diasporic Judaism, which was present in Asia Minor, as evidenced in the settlement of several hundred Jewish families in the region, following orders by Antiochus.[6] For that matter, Sardis in Lydia was the site of one of the largest ancient synagogues ever discovered.[7] In time, these "Galatians" would have been colonized and at least partially "Romanized." This may have been the cultural context in which Paul, as an "Apostle to the Uncircumcision," proclaimed that the good news of Jesus Christ was "about breaking down social boundaries, dismantling taboos,

3. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535 Chapters 1–4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 47.
4. Cf. Aliou Cissé Niang, *Faith and Freedom in Galatia and Senegal: The Apostle Paul, Colonists and Sending Gods* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 47–50.
5. Adgistis was her Phrygian name, but she was worshiped under many other names, many of them identified with particular mountains. Cf. Susan M. Elliott, "Choose your Mother, Choose your Master: Galatians 4:21–5:1 in the Shadow of the Anatolian Mother of the Gods," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118 (1999): 661–83.
6. Cf. Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish Antiquities, Books 1–19*, trans. Henry St. J. Thackeray et al., LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930–1965), 12.148–53.
7. A. Thomas Kraabel, Review of Paul R. Trebilco, *Jewish Communities in Asia Minor*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 55 (1993): 186–87.

and overthrowing and challenging human institutions that dehumanize people."[8]

Davina Lopez reminds us that the Galatians (whom she likewise identifies with the Celts/Gauls, or in Greek, *Keltoi/Galatai*) would have been perceived as the "quintessential barbarians" from the perspective of imperial power. The Celts/Gauls appear in ancient Roman inscriptions, texts, and images as "stereotypical representatives of those who must be conquered," placed symbolically on the negative side of such binaries as civilized/uncivilized, male/female or Romans/nations.[9] This means, as Brigitte Kahl makes clear, that the "Galatians/Gauls/Celts," regardless of their physical location, need to be understood in ways that transcend a single ethnic or geographical identity. She reminds us that "Galatians" is "a term soaked with memories, fears, and aggression that are completely absent from our New Testament dictionaries." The Galatians function as a symbol of the "barbarians par excellence," of the vanquished enemies of Rome, and of "the history of the conquest of lawlessness by law." In sum, for the dominant culture of the time, the "Galatians" would have been the "others" of an imperial order that painted itself as the essence of civilization and legality.[10] The reality of empire traverses the theological themes of the letter and is a presence always latent in Paul's awareness of power relations within the community and in his championship of grace and freedom.

Paul mentions in the letter that he found gracious hospitality among the believers in Christ of the Galatian churches just when he needed it: at a time when he was suffering from an ailment possibly having to do with his eyes. In Galatians 4:13 he says, "You know that it was because of a physical infirmity that I first announced the gospel to you," and in verse 15 he adds, "had it been possible, you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me." For a missionary, preacher, and apostle such as Paul, it would have made for a strong bond to have been welcomed generously by the Galatians at a vulnerable time in his life. For the community to have taken his

8. Niang, *Faith and Freedom*, 8.
9. Davina Lopez, *Apostle to the Conquered: Reimagining Paul's Mission* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 103.
10. Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined,* 51.

preaching to heart would have been doubly satisfying. It would also likely have seemed akin to a personal betrayal if those same communities seemed on the brink of abandoning his interpretation of the gospel for one quite contrary to it.

The Galatian churches were most likely made up primarily of followers of Jesus who were not Jewish by birth.[11] It is possible that some of the Galatians were Gentile proselytes within Judaism who had come to confess faith in Jesus while most others were pagan converts to the way of Jesus without exposure to Judaism outside of the preaching of the gospel. Here we find potential seeds of conflict. There were many Gentiles interested in Judaism and sympathetic to it, both as God-fearers and proselytes, but for Gentiles to become part of the Jesus movement without simultaneously adhering to Judaism would have been surprising or even scandalous. It seems to have caused quite a stir in the young church in Jerusalem and beyond for Paul to present himself as an apostle to the Gentiles, espousing the hitherto unheard-of conviction that non-Jewish believers did not need also to become observant Jews in order to follow Jesus.

The community around the Jerusalem church, which was the mother church of the other nascent ecclesial communities and had among its leadership people like John, Peter, and James the brother of Jesus, was forced (in part by Paul) to make a decision about this matter of non-Jewish followers of Jesus. To speak of "Christians" and "Christianity" at this early juncture is admittedly anachronistic, but difficult to avoid in practice. At any rate, the massive incorporation into the Jesus movement of Gentiles who increasingly became "Christians" without also becoming observant Jews (a development synonymous with Paul's mission) is one of the reasons that the faith community later known as "Christianity" became identifiable as something other than a sectarian movement within Judaism. The apostles in Jerusalem concluded that while Jewish followers of

11. J. Louis Martyn states unequivocally that "Just as there were no Jewish communities in the Galatian cities, and no former Jews in the Galatian churches, so no Jews are addressed in the Galatian letter, and no Jews are being spoken about in the letter." J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary,* Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 40. I agree that the letter is by no means an anti-Jewish polemic and that the community was primarily made up of Gentiles, but the presence of Paul himself puts an observant Jew into the mix.

Jesus would continue to be Jewish, Gentile believers in Christ did not necessarily have to convert to Judaism fully in order to follow Jesus, though they were to avoid certain actions that would be offensive to Jewish disciples of Jesus. Luke tells this story in Acts 15, and Paul gives his version in Galatians 2. The two accounts are slightly different, but they agree on the principle that contextual versions of Christianity are legitimate ways to receive the good news of the gospel in new places.

Not all scholars believe that the conflicts that appear in Galatians were between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus, or what we might call (for lack of a better term) "Jewish Christians" and "Gentile Christians." Mark Nanos, for example, holds that the basic conflict reflected in the epistle is properly described as "intra-Jewish," not "intra-Christian." He detects differences between "Jewish subgroups and non-Christ-believing Jewish authorities" who disagree on how to incorporate non-Jews into the community. Some (non-Christ-believing Jews) would have considered proselyte conversion the only appropriate way for full inclusion of Gentiles in the community, whereas others (Christ-believing Jews) would have not. They would all have appealed to the Torah but come to different conclusions on the basis of the relevance they claimed for Jesus and their ideas about the place of non-Jews in the age to come.

My own reading leads me to see the tensions in the epistle as arising primarily between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus (i.e., so-called "intra-Christian" rather than "intra-Jewish" tensions). However, Nanos's point that the question of the place of Gentiles in God's economy significantly predates institutional Christian identity or factionalism between Christian groups is well taken.[12] Any intra-Christian debate at that time was embedded in a larger Jewish context, which had among its riches a long tradition of how to deal with Hellenistic cultures and the "righteous ones" among the pagans. That is one reason that some of the "fiercest debates within first-generation Christianity," which had precisely to do with the question of "whether or to what extent" the boundaries marking off

12. Mark Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians: Paul's Letter in First-Century Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 6–9 et passim.

"Christian" Jews from "Christian" Gentiles should be maintained, can said to have been formulated "entirely in Jewish terms."[13]

The larger Jewish community of the time in all its variety, including emerging groups of Jewish followers of Jesus, is without question the "mother" of Pauline theology, even as the Jewish Paul is—at least in his own estimation—the apostle and "mother" of non-Jewish Christians in Galatia. There is in this sense no tension between "Pauline" and "Jewish" Christianity, since Paul's interpretation of how Gentiles could come to be heirs of God's promise to Abraham emerged from a Jewish worldview that was by no means exclusively his own. As a Jewish interpreter of Paul, Nanos warns Christian readers to be wary of anti-Jewish themes and attitudes to be found even in those non-Jewish Christian interpreters of Galatians who emphatically try to avoid anti-Jewish attitudes and rhetoric. He points out that latent anti-Jewish themes remain in such interpretations, especially whenever the Pauline version of the gospel is painted as if it were something absolutely new and in discontinuity with the God of the Old Testament or as if God's revelation were exclusively linked to the Christian faith. Connected to this problem is the persistently negative valuation of Jewish Christians in Galatians (the so-called Judaizers) by many Christian commentators, an attitude easily spread to non-Christian Jews as well.[14]

It is therefore important to keep in mind that Paul is addressing a specific group when he writes the epistle to the Galatians: namely, "Gentiles who have already believed in Christ and received the Spirit of God as a testimony to their new status as righteous ones among the people of God."[15] Put succinctly, Paul's letter advocates the inclusion of Gentiles *as Gentiles* into the community of the people of God. Paul does not think that Gentiles should first have to become proselytes in order to belong to God's people. His critique of the practice of circumcision and of the need to abide by dietary guidelines or other aspects of the law is not meant as a rejection of Judaism or of

13. John Dunn, "Echoes of Intra-Jewish Polemic in Paul's Letter to the Galatians," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 112 (1993): 459–77.
14. Cf. Mark D. Nanos, "How Inter-Christian Approaches to Paul's Rhetoric Can Perpetuate Negative Valuations of Jewishness—Although Proposing to Avoid That Outcome," *Biblical Interpretation* 13 (2005): 255–69.
15. Nanos, *The Irony of Galatians,* 15.

a Christian Jewish alternative. What he rejects is the need to require such practices of Gentile followers of Jesus who were not previously proselytes. Paul adamantly holds that it is not necessary for Gentiles to become full-fledged Jews in order to follow Jesus, in part because the apostle does not advocate "sameness" or homogeneity but rather the way of Jesus from within particularity.[16] As Paul will argue in the heart of the epistle, in Christ there is ample room for difference and heterogeneity. For that reason, equality in Christ (as advocated in Gal. 3:28) does not lead to the erasure of differences but rather aims at breaking down hierarchical relationships among many different people and groups.

A further point at stake here is that wherever the gospel is received, the people who accept it have to figure out the balance between what is good and worth keeping from the community's ancestral legacy and what needs to be given up or transformed in light of the gospel as it can best be interpreted in a given time and place. Accordingly, it is not necessary for non-Jews to become Jews in order to be Christians, though Christians accept the Hebrew Bible as Scripture and respect the faith of Jesus; it is also not necessary for Jews to cease being Jews if they do follow Jesus any more than Paul gave up his Jewish faith and identity. Even if he had wanted to, Paul could not have discarded his cultural, educational, and religious identity of origin. Clearly, he had no desire to do so; he knew that his heritage was precious.

However, given the work of the Holy Spirit not only in Judaism but also in renewing the face of the whole earth, it is not only Paul's heritage that is valuable. By an extension of the principles applied by the early church, people from the global South, for instance, should not have to adhere to the canons of Western Christendom in order to become Christians. Christianity has been present in Europe for a long time, but it is not a European or a Western religion; it does not belong to any particular geographical region or cultural sphere. As C. S. Song argues, the gospel does not have to make a detour through Paris or London on its way from Jerusalem to Beijing. The norms, theological concepts, and cultural idiosyncrasies developed

16. Cf. Pamela Eisenbaum, "Is Paul the Father of Misogyny and Antisemitism?," *Cross Currents* 50 (Winter 2000–2001): 517–18.

by Western churches are not essential for the expression of the gospel in Asia.[17] Those of us who profess the Christian faith are all one and we are all equal in Christ, certainly, but we are not all identical. Whatever our background and heritage, if we are to follow Jesus, we will have to sift through our traditions and try to rediscover both their ambiguities and their liberating potential in light of the good news of Jesus Christ.

This exciting principle is not always easy to uphold. George Tinker, writing from an American Indian perspective, points out that temporal categories, such as historicity, have been primary to Eurocentric biblical interpretations of the reign or commonweal of God to the detriment of spatiality. Spatial categories, in particular the categories of place and of land, are extraordinarily important to Amerindian spirituality, which leads Tinker to underline the importance of creation as a whole in Christian thinking about the *basileia* rather than to focus only on an anthropocentric historicity. From this perspective, the way of Jesus Christ has to be an actual path, in a real place, never an abstraction, and the reign of God is about the hegemony of a Creator who calls us "to assume our rightful place in the world as humble two-leggeds in the circle of creation with all the other created."[18] According to Paul's understanding in Galatians, then, it would not be necessary for a member of an Indian nation of the Americas first to become a "Western Christian" in order to follow Jesus; in fact, such a requirement would constitute a distortion of the good news.

That does not mean that Amerindian Christians would be expected to cut themselves off from the wider Christian traditions or that they are immune to cultural shifts and hybridity but rather that the exact contours of faithfulness to the path of Jesus should be allowed to emerge in freedom through the guidance of the Spirit, not according to a colonial template. The freedom to develop faithful communities in a particular context actually can allow people to find meaningful connections to wider traditions, both those belonging to

17. Choan-Seng Song, "From Israel to Asia: A Theological Leap," *Ecumenical Review* 28 (July 1, 1976): 252–65.

18. George E. Tinker, *Spirit and Resistance: Political Theologian and American Indian Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 113, cf. 93–99.

the Christian faith and those of the community's ancestors or neighbors who were not Christian. In them, the community can learn to discern the healing, transformative work of the Spirit.

The great thing about the decision made by the early church, at least as it was interpreted by Paul in Galatians, was that it opened the door for much creativity and locally based solutions about how to follow Jesus in a given place and time. Any given culture will have both liberating and oppressive aspects that need to be deepened or transformed, as the case may be. As part of the task of discernment it is particularly helpful to look at a given context from the perspective of gender to see how cultural practices are manifested in the concrete bodies of men and women. Paul does this in Galatians as he ponders the significance of male circumcision in emerging Gentile Christian communities. Musimbi Kanyoro makes a similar point as she constructs an African feminist hermeneutic in a Kenyan context. On the one hand, she affirms African culture as "the thread which strings our beliefs and social set-up together." On the other, she warns that any particular culture is a two-edged sword, because some aspects of it "are embraced without considering their oppressive nature." As the "gospel comes face to face with African traditions," she along with other African women theologians are "asking the church in Africa to be a witness of God's liberation."[19] It is in this kind of tension between the celebration of culture and its critique that a critical ecclesiology—or more widely, a critical theology—is born.

Particularity does not imply a lack of unity or relationship. The larger Christian community is united across time and space by having a common Scripture. Even more importantly, it is held together by the Holy Spirit, who sheds light on those Scriptures. From the perspective of Christian history, however, it becomes clear that one unintended outcome of the decision of the early church that gave such freedom to contextual responses to the gospel was that as Jewish Christians became a minority in the wider Christian church, anti-Jewish sentiments and practices reared their heads. Some

19. Musimbi R. A. Kanyoro, "The Challenge of Feminist Theologies," in *In Search of a Round Table: Gender, Theology and Church Leadership*, ed. Musimbi Kanyoro (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1997), 179–80.

people even used Paul's writings to justify anti-Semitism. Jewish children living in majority Christian societies continue to be familiar with the ugly story of being accused of having "killed Jesus." One pertinent question that arises, then, is whether the principle of contextuality, as fleshed out by Paul in Galatians and inherited by the Christian movement, is inherently anti-Jewish and therefore flawed or whether it can be retrieved and given new life in a context of interfaith respect. Even if we are convinced that it is the latter, and that it is a principle of great value, it will be a conviction continually put to the test by Christianity's own checkered history.

The theme of the relationship between Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus and the need for a contextual Gentile form of the Christian faith should not obscure the wider imperial context in which both Galatian Jews and Galatian Gentiles were the "Others" of a Rome that was convinced it was the embodiment of law, order, civilization, and excellence. "Jews and Gentiles of all stripes in Galatia," as vanquished peoples, "had to come to terms with each other and with the omnipresent realities of Roman colonialism."[20] When Paul develops his ideas about faith and about the law, it is not only the Torah that sets the terms of the discussion but also the Roman *nomos*.

In the time of Paul the Roman imperial presence was simply "the most basic reality of life." In other words, as Brigitte Kahl shows, it would have been impossible to have any debate about the terms of "Jewishness" apart from the "Romanness" of Galatia (wherever its exact geographical location) or indeed of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, or anywhere else in the empire where Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus were to be found. In Kahl's words, "whatever the subject of contention between Paul and his 'stupid Galatians' regarding *Jewish* law and *Jewish* affiliation, it was *Roman* law that ultimately defined and enforced what was licit or illicit."[21] Then as now, imperial power is known and experienced by people of many different religious convictions. It is presupposed, often naturalized, and therefore can be almost invisible in their discussions, yet it is present and often sets the terms of the debate.

20. Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined,* 7.
21. Ibid., 6–7.

Paul's struggle to find a liberating expression of the gospel of Jesus in the Galatian context as a Jewish follower of Christ living in the shadow of empire and called to share the gospel with the "barbarians" is a theme that can be illuminating to us today. On the one hand, despite the distortions of some later interpretations of Pauline theology, Paul himself is unwilling to fall into the disagreeable Christian habit of anti-Jewish rhetoric and behavior. On the other hand, unlike later Christendom models with their equally unhealthy habit of accommodating faith to empire or other forms of hegemony in "this evil age," Paul is looking for concrete ways to subvert the dominant system by "running well" (Gal. 5:7) according to God's Spirit of transformation and liberation—something we also are called to do in our own time, space, and place.

Freedom is a central theme of Galatians. It is not the freedom to consume or to dominate but the freedom to love and to be transformed ever more in God's image and likeness. Because dominant ideas in society often interpret freedom as the capacity to do whatever we like and especially to amass power, money, and possessions, the theme of freedom—as Paul understands it—is a difficult one to make our own. We tend to take detours that lead us to false dichotomies such as "law versus gospel" or "flesh versus spirit" that seem at first sight to be taken from Paul's letter but miss the heart of his message.

As a case in point, the valuable Reformation insight about the centrality of justification by faith, based in large part on Galatians, has too often led to making the law into a simple foil for faith or into a caricature of what torah means both for the Old and the New Testament. What in Paul functions as a dialectical relationship in which the law is valued and respected becomes an excuse for bashing those who are thought to observe the law in an "outmoded" way: namely, Jews or any other group of opponents such as (in Luther's case) Anabaptists or the Roman Catholic hierarchy. While "justification by faith" was a liberating insight in the context of a church that had become legalistic and stifling, the theology of Galatians cannot be reduced to this one theme. Pauline "justification" cannot be helpful theologically without being related to the wider liberating work of the Holy Spirit in society.

Clearly, just as in the "search for the historical Jesus" one learns at least as much about the person searching for Jesus as one does about Jesus, a given interpretation of Galatians will reflect the interests and concerns of its interpreters. Augustine wrote his commentary on Galatians in the short period when he was a priest, before becoming bishop. His intention was primarily pastoral; he wanted to see how Paul built Christian community and how the epistle could serve as a model of how to give and receive correction.[22] Jerome, who was primarily a Hebrew Bible scholar and mostly wrote commentaries on Old Testament books, dictated his commentary (along with commentaries on Philemon, Ephesians, and Titus) in response to a request from his mentor and friend Paula and her daughter Eustochium. He also mentions that he writes for the benefit of another patron and student of the Scriptures, Marcella, as a kind of consolatory exegesis on the loss of her mother.[23] This was at a time when he was struggling to find the proper balance between classical influences and his reading of Christian interpreters such as Origen, and so writing about Galatians functioned as a contextual hermeneutical exercise for him as well. In his commentaries Luther found parallels between his own situation, surrounded by many adversaries, and that of Paul. Each of these perspectives sheds light on our interpretation of the text, yet none of them are the "definitive" interpretation of Galatians. The reservoir of meaning of the text is deep enough to keep giving of itself in new ways to those who are willing to engage it.

Nevertheless, beyond our various standpoints as contemporary readers, it is worth remembering that Paul can be difficult to understand simply because he dictated his text in the heat of the moment and at times sacrificed precision to passion. As Luther (himself at times a tempestuous writer) remarks, Paul "speaks with great fervor, and anyone who is fervent when he speaks cannot be very precise about following the rules of grammar and the principles of rhetoric."[24] Along those same lines, I have to admit that in writing a

22. See Eric Plumer, "Preface and Acknowledgments" in *Augustine's Commentary on Galatians: Introduction, Text, Translation, and Notes*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), ix–x.
23. See Andrew Cain, "Introduction," in Jerome, *Commentary on Galatians,* 17.
24. Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535 Chapters 1–4*, 92.

book such as this one it is difficult to be consistent grammatically and, for instance, to maintain the third person plural when writing about the addressees of the epistle. It is true that Paul is dictating a letter to the Galatians (to "them"), but as one who identifies as a Christian, I also experience the text as written to "me" and to "us." The very pneumatology of Paul's text pushes me in that direction, inasmuch as I accept his premise from Galatians 4:6 that the Spirit of the Son sent into "our" (though some manuscripts read "your") hearts is still at work in "us." Even so, as a contemporary reader of the epistle, I find that not all passages in the letter speak to me equally, so that some sections seem addressed more specifically to "them" and only indirectly to "us," while others seem immediately relevant both to "them" and to "us." Finding the fruitful interstices between "them" and "us," and between "then" and "now," denying neither of them, never collapsing them into one, yet finding a place to stand (and read) as we are caught between worlds, is one of the main challenges of reading the Bible as a theologian.

My use of "we" also makes transparent my point of departure, in that I am admittedly reading and writing as part of a hermeneutical community made up primarily of people who identify in some measure with following Jesus in faith. I am a teaching and writing theologian in an academic setting and therefore part of a vital community of teachers and learners. Equally important, though, is that I am part of a (Mennonite) community of faith. Both in my work as a seminary professor and in my life as a church member, I try to be a theologian for the church and for the world. The latter means that I take on as part of my responsibility the task of helping remind the church (including myself) that the gospel of Jesus Christ should be good news for all people, whether or not they belong to a church. Last, the use of "we" reflects the *nosotros* and *nosotras* of my Latin American roots and my commitment to what Latino and Latina theologians in the United States have called a *teología en conjunto.* This is a theology constructed collectively even if a given person sometimes articulates it.[25] Everything that I write and think is directly or indirectly

25. A paradigmatic example is José David Rodríguez and Loida I. Martell-Otero (eds.), *Teología en Conjunto: A Collaborative Hispanic Protestant Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

indebted to my "life together" with others in many intersecting communities both in the Southern and the Northern hemispheres and thus is a reflection of it. To say "we" in thinking of the meaning of Galatians "for me and for us" is therefore a reflection of the embedded, diverse, and collaborative quality of life in community that to me seems central to the Christian faith; it does not mean that I think I have the authority to "speak for" or "instead of" other people.

As Friedrich Schleiermacher puts it in explaining the heart of hermeneutics, to interpret a text means to enter into a conversation with it, question it directly, and allow oneself to be questioned by it.[26] At the very least, reading Galatians should allow us to enter into a fruitful dialogue with Paul, whether or not we can agree with him on every (or any) point he is making.

In the interpretive attempt represented by this book, I am particularly concerned about themes such as gender equality, antiracism, the problem of Christian supersessionism, God's option for the poor, the ambiguous legacy of Pauline theology, and the possibility of a liberating, de-colonial and counter-hegemonic hermeneutic of Scripture. Paul's Christology of the "wonderful exchange" (understood as a Trinitarian dynamic that is much more encompassing than substitutionary atonement), the strong pneumatological undercurrents of the epistle, and the principle of freedom for contextual expressions of a discipleship of equals seem to proffer hopeful possibilities for reading Galatians—and the gospel of Jesus generally—as good news in many different geographical, cultural, and historical contexts. It seems to me that the epistle has much to offer. I see it as a window that can be used by the Spirit of Life to let in some fresh air and healing light to sometimes dark ecclesial corners and to instill in those who follow Jesus renewed hope for living, loving, and steadfastly resisting injustice in troubled times.

26. Cf. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics and Criticism,* trans. Andrew Bowie (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 90–157.