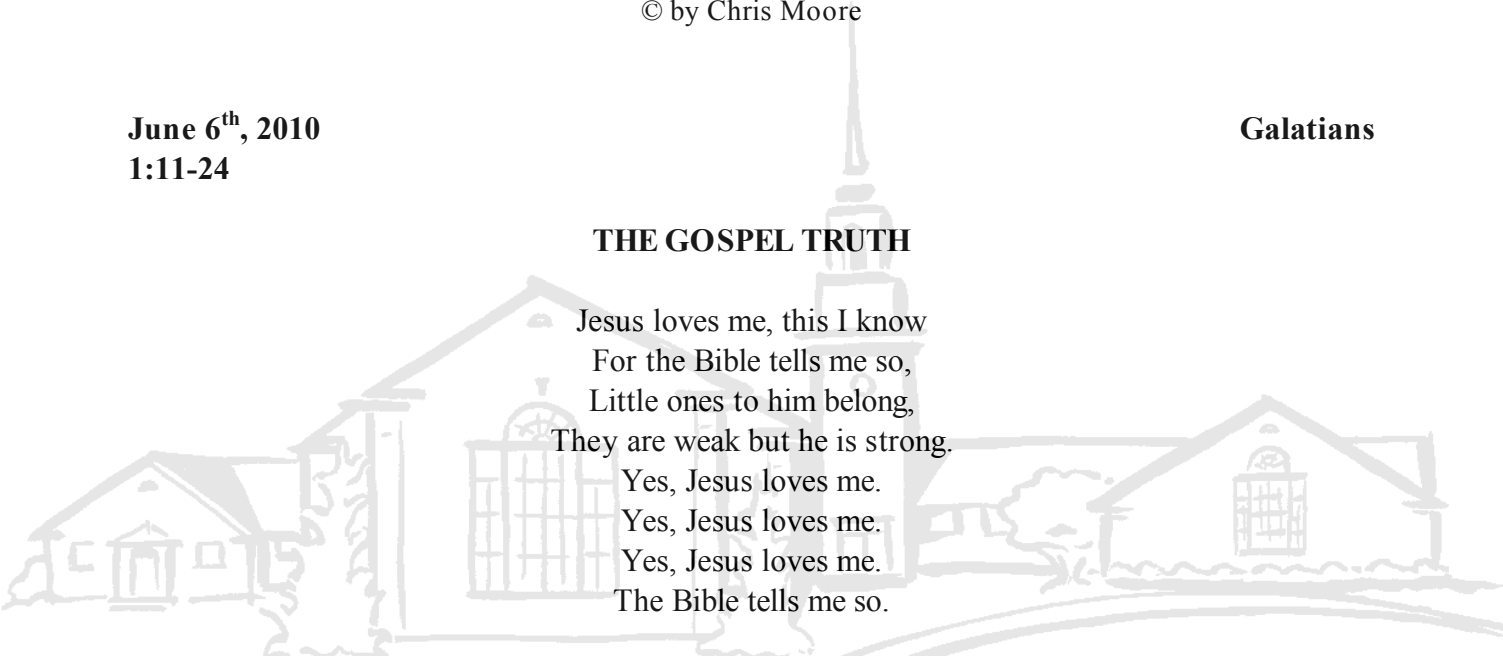


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June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010  
1:11-24

Galatians

### THE GOSPEL TRUTH



Jesus loves me, this I know  
For the Bible tells me so,  
Little ones to him belong,  
They are weak but he is strong.  
Yes, Jesus loves me.  
Yes, Jesus loves me.  
Yes, Jesus loves me.  
The Bible tells me so.

We all know this song, even if we didn't learn it in Sunday school. An irony is that this kid's song holds within it a very divisive line. No, it's not "They are weak but he is strong", it is "The Bible tells me so". We have all grown up in a culture that praises, cherishes and even idolizes the Bible. It is sold as the place to go for all of your answers, all of your needs and all of your guidelines for life. We have such a hyper-inflated sense of the Biblical text that when Paul says in this passage that the gospel is "not of human origin" it is taken as proof that the Bible is the infallible word of God handed down to us from the clouds in King James English. We probably think of gospel as part of the written word – the parts labeled with Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But the four versions of Jesus' life, death and resurrection are not what Paul is talking about. In fact, he could not refer to such texts because they weren't even written yet. Paul is living in a pre-gospel world, at least in the way that we typically think of gospel. So, what in the world is he talking about?

I happen to think that the Bible is a collection of stories – accounts not of a static God, but of encounters with the divine...some of them we can make sense of and even identify with and some whose veracity we might question. But still stories, and as with all stories, we must relate to them in order to find meaning. But the more common description of the Bible is found in a bumper sticker I see quite frequently: "God said it, I believe it and that settles it". For many, it is as if God walked in the office one day and found Moses busy at his desk. "Moses", God said, "Get your notepad, I'd like you to take a memo on the exact dimensions of the tabernacle and the proper way to cultivate your crops. Oh, and get me some coffee."

The truth is that our own encounters with God are far more mysterious and untranslatable than we seem to want to make the Biblical record. As if there were times when God spoke clearly and walked right next to us but now God is limited to words on a page...that God was somehow totally accessible at one time but is now elusive and vague. I don't think that this is how people think of God, even very fundamentalist people, but the adherence to the Bible as primary authoritative source has led to a very unhealthy use of the Bible as a weapon, taking passages out of context, doing what I call "line item" reading of the Bible and generally reading what you want with no regard to the overall theme of the Bible – God's sense of justice, inclusive love and call to stewardship of creation. Instead of an aid to our faith journey, the Bible has become for many a stumbling block or, worse yet, a litmus test.

In this way, the Bible gets viewed by lots of people as suspect. I allude to last week's sermon when I say that if you go seeking answers, you are going to have to get creative in how you read the Bible. But if you go seeking wisdom, the incongruencies, contradictions and disturbing passages simply become part of a larger story. You can read the harshness of Levitical law in the light of Jesus' willingness to quote law and then change it, as he does more than once. You begin to look for different things.

The great storyteller and professor of theology, Tex Sample tells this tale. When he was growing up he had a Sunday school teacher who was the king of the small town in Mississippi where he grew up. This guy was the wealthiest and most important man in town. And he taught a great Sunday school class, Tex recalls. He seemed to know just how to talk to a room full of 5<sup>th</sup> grade boys. But Tex also remembers that he took every chance he had to tell the boys that slavery was the proper order of things, that it was Biblical and right and that blacks were inferior and that they had to defend segregation with their very lives.

Tex says that he often wonders what his life would have been like if that was the only voice he heard on the matter. But there was also a former missionary woman in the congregation. She had lived for many years in Korea and had been exposed to a wide variety of cultures. He doesn't recall any direct confrontation between the Sunday school teacher and this woman, but he does remember that she made a point of meeting those boys as often as possible and inviting them to look at artifacts she brought back from Korea. She taught them that God loved everyone and sang them the song that told them that "Jesus loves the children, all the children of the world".

Tex says that his Sunday school teacher took the racist story and put God's story in it, so that it supported the racist story. But the missionary took God's story and put it in the racist story and dismantled it. In other words, the Sunday school teacher read the Bible and then lived his life, but the missionary woman lived her life and then read the Bible. That's our real challenge in our lives, to listen to the stories that are all around us, some of them from the Biblical texts, to encounter them and to interject God's story into them. That's the gospel – the interjection of God's story into our own.

We hear a lot about the Bible as primary authority and that if you don't hold to certain fundamentals, then you are somehow "out". Yet, this was not always the case, and was not the

case for the longest portion of our faith tradition and history. We have a vast history in which spirituality, prayer and the way you lived was primary - the scripture reflected this. So we have an argument going on in church now. An argument about scripture and ethics, yes, but more so an argument about how we experience God. Is God present in the scriptures is one question, but the far more important one to me is this – is God limited by the scriptures? Can we not see that even in the flow of the Biblical text there is a changing God who bends rules and makes new allowances and changes midstream while saying in a variety of ways, “Behold, I am doing something new! Can you perceive it?” This is an argument with profound implications.

Paul is also engaged in an argument in this letter to the Galatian church. The subtext of this passage is not very clear from the cut that the lectionary reading gives us, but Paul is defending himself. He is caught in some sort of accusatory position and he has to defend his own authority. Why? Well there’s lots of speculation, but I think it has something to do with the fact that Paul was the ultimate convert. Not only did he join this new Jesus movement, but he did so after being one of the self-professed persecutors of the movement. His encounter with the risen Christ is a story known only to him, there were no other witnesses. So, if you were holding the Democratic National Convention and Rush Limbaugh called to say that he’d had a change of heart and would like to keynote speak how exactly would you react?

Up until this point, the Jesus movement was driven by teaching. The disciples learned from Jesus and they taught others and so on and so on. That’s the group that is led by Peter. But Paul is stating something radical. He was not taught this Gospel, it was revealed to him. So, Paul just heads off to preach the Good News to the people of the world and at some point encounters a member of the Jesus Movement who sees him preaching Jesus and kind of flips out. What is going on here? What is this guy doing on our side?

And, as it turns out, there were some serious differences between Peter and Paul. Peter was a good Jew, just like Paul, but he was insisting that people who wished to follow Jesus become Jews first. For the men, that meant circumcision. Not exactly what you’d call a great evangelical method. But Paul was moving the gospel out into the gentile world. He was teaching something else entirely, and doing so outside the bonds of the “inner circle” of Jesus followers. He and Peter get pretty nasty in their accusations against one another...Peter calls Paul a “heretic” and Paul says that Peter is a “hypocrite” and “self-condemned”. Yet, we still hold these two as pillars of the church. Somehow, despite the fact that they disagreed on what they saw as “fundamentals”, these two laid the foundation for the church.

Maybe it’s because they didn’t have the Bible yet. Maybe it’s because scripture played a different role in their faith lives.

Paul was probably not comfortable with this call from Christ. He was probably not at ease about throwing the rulebook out the window and questioning almost everything he had once followed so zealously.

The Gospel is not the stories contained in the collection we call the Bible, the Gospel is *OUR* stories.



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