



Last week we talked about Phillip and the Ethiopian eunuch that he met, befriended and baptized all in the same day. The part of the story that the Bible leaves out is the reaction of the other members of the Jesus Movement when they found out what Phillip had done.

The context we need to remember is that Early Church was not yet its own religion, it was a movement within Judaism. And Judaism comes with the 613 laws of the Torah, not to mention an identity that one is born with. In other words, there were 100% people within the Jesus Movement who heard about Phillip baptizing the eunuch and totally flipped out.

We know this because it becomes a big issue within the movement. Enough non-Jews, like the Ethiopian eunuch, become invested in the Jesus Movement, but not necessarily in Judaism. And the Jesus Movement is faced with a question: Must one practice Judaism to be a follower of Jesus?

It's a question that nearly tears the church apart. The leadership of the church makes a remarkable proclamation that converts to the Jesus Movement *don't* need to convert to Judaism. The only requirements they ask are the same basic requirements that non-Jewish visitors to the Temple were required.

There were basically two standards: Jews in the movement continued to practice Judaism as they had their whole lives, but non-Jews were allowed to discover on their own what following Jesus meant in the context of their own lives and cultures.

Even so, there were traditionalists who didn't like this. After all, what could be more important than God's holy law, passed down through generation after generation? Despite the church taking this radically welcoming official position toward non-Jews, there were people who still felt obliged to make them follow the **whole** law.

Nowhere is the story of this struggle between tradition and progress better told than in the book of the Bible we call Galatians. And yet, we have to intuit much of the story because Galatians is not a history book. It is a letter written by a man named Paul to a community of non-Jewish Christians in Galatia (the area of the world we now call Turkey).

Paul was a fascinating person. Before joining the Jesus Movement, Paul was one of the people fighting the hardest *against* the Jesus Movement. His joining the movement is one of the biggest twists of all time. It's like Lex Luthor showing up at Superman's front door and asking to join the Super Friends. Galatians is the only place we get to hear Paul's story [in his own words](#). He doesn't pull punches either. He describes himself as someone who "was

violently persecuting the church of God and was trying to destroy it.” He openly admits that he was hard at work advancing himself through the ranks in the more traditional context of Judaism, and that going after the Jesus Movement was a part of that. But he experienced a direct revelation of Jesus Christ, so that, in his words, “I might proclaim him among the Gentiles [non-Jews].”

Imagine your community’s biggest enemy showing up at your door and saying, *Hey where do I sign up? (Don’t worry God told me you guys are actually ok.)*

Church leaders were rightfully wary of Paul’s involvement. So Paul made his own way. He identified this other group in the movement that no one seemed to know what to do with — non-Jews. Paul essentially says, *If ya’ll aren’t going to make these folks a part of the community, I guess I will since I’m a reject too.* Paul ends up founding Christian communities all over the Greek world, including this one in Galatia.

And the letter he writes them is *angry*.

Paul’s anger is over something that happens after Paul helped the Galatians get their community started and went on in his travels. Paul founded their community according to the official Jesus Movement line: that they, as non-Jews, need not worry about any of the 613 laws in the Torah, the same 613 rules and regulations that Paul had mastered so completely in his previous life.

But when Paul left, new teachers showed up: Traditionalists who told the Galatians that, actually, yes, you DO have to follow those 613 rules, starting with circumcision.

Can you see what makes Paul so mad? Paul started this vibrant community with the liberating idea that all they needed was Jesus, and then some bozos come in saying, *No, actually, Jesus isn't enough. You need to do a lot more to be a part of this community.*

Paul is mad at the traditionalists that have come in and vexed the Galatians, but he's also mad at the Galatians for falling for this! The Galatian community reacted to the anxiety of the Traditionalists by capitulating. By going along with it. That's an easy thing to do. When someone comes to us and tells us we're not good enough, a natural reaction is to prove we *are* good enough. It's especially tempting when the accuser is wielding tradition: *I can't be wrong because generation after generation of dead people agree with me.*

But Paul doesn't buy it, and says as much in his letter: "Listen!" — a good way to start if you want people to listen — "I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you." Circumcision, the first and most permanent step towards converting to Judaism, comes to be a metaphor for Paul for accepting the extra expectations and requirements that the church had decided were unnecessary for non-Jewish Christians. So here Paul is saying if these new members of the Jesus Movement accept extra requirements, Jesus — the reason they joined in the first place — will be meaningless to them.

Think about what a statement that is. So many of us go along with the expectations of others because it feels easier than upsetting them. But Paul says if you do that, you're going backwards. You're letting tradition take you back to a time before the big event that changes everything. "You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ." (That's a little circumcision pun there. Who said the Bible's not funny?)

Paul finishes this thought by saying, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”

We are reaching for the next step in our evolution as a church. We want to expand our spiritual home so that it can be a spiritual home for a generation that has lost faith in church. That’s a daunting task. It will be tempting to avoid this challenge by dismissing the members of that generation — to say,

I don’t like the way they’re dressing, or,

Aren’t their kids awfully disruptive? or,

They’re always here for the Wednesday night dinner, why don’t they come to worship?

The new generation — *if* we can even convince them to give us a try — *is* going to fail to meet our expectations. Part of the reason they haven’t come back is that they didn’t like those expectations! If they find comfort here, it will be because we’ve made the intentional decision to jettison our expectations.

Paul says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything. Neither the way we’ve done church in the past nor the way we might do church in the future counts for anything either. All that really matters is faith working through love.

Our new vision is that First Congregational Church be authentically known as a place where open-minded people can Be, Belong, and Become. To make this a place where new people can Be will require us to rethink what a church-going person looks like. The Early Church made a *huge* concession to the outside world. They made the entire religion that their movement was based

on *optional*. Because they knew the real work of the church is faith working through love. If they could make an accommodation that huge and radically welcoming, what can *we* do?

I can't wait to find out.