

The North Galatian Theory

In my final year of theological studies at Catholic University – while still a seminarian – I was enrolled in a Scripture course taught by Fr. John Weisengoff – the faculty's holy terror. Students lived in fear of his eye selecting them out during class – and if you came up with a wrong answer or a personal opinion on a text, you would be ridiculed without mercy. It happened to me when I entered his class five minutes late one day. It seemed like I had to stand there an eternity before his bile ran dry.

And yet, when I wrote a paper on St. Paul's *Letter to the Galatians* I somehow found his favor. He summoned me to his quarters on campus, handed it back and said, "Wood, you write like an Anglican." He meant that as a compliment! By the way, our few daily Mass communicants are probably the only members of our parish who have been exposed to this powerful Letter this past week.

My paper dealt with who these Galatians were to whom Paul wrote around 48-50 AD. One theory is that they were Irishmen! Well maybe not Irish as we know it but they were indeed of the same stock: Celts who had migrated to the northern regions of Asia Minor, evangelized by Paul. My paper favored that theory, counter to alternative theories. Why? Because there were sound arguments in favor of it and (more influentially) because I'm half Irish (Celtic) and scholarship is not without its biases.

And what a letter! Paul seemed infuriated. He had passed through this region revealing God – through Christ – to be a God of Mercy, Grace – lifting the burden of humanity's constant paralysis of fear and guilt, releasing these once superstitious Celts to live graciously even as God lives. But Paul was followed up by other preachers who insisted these new converts had to embrace all the rules and regulations and often divine terror of the Old Testament, to worry about minute practices, to reinstitute circumcision. And these Celts, intimidated by such reactionary teachings, wobbled, allowing that the early Church might drift into becoming a sect within Judaism instead the New, Fresh Creation it was meant to be – risen from the deadliness of anything less than bigness of heart, the bigness of God. Listen to Paul:

I am amazed that you are so quickly forsaking the one who called you by grace for a different gospel (not that there is another). But there are some who are disturbing you and wish to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one that we preached to you, let that one be #@!%&! O stupid Galatians! Who has bewitched you, . . . did you receive the Spirit from works of the law, or from faith in what you heard? Are you so stupid? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh? Did you experience so many things in vain?

Before faith came, we were held in custody under law, confined for the faith that was to be revealed- Consequently, the law was our disciplinarian for Christ . . . But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a disciplinarian- For through faith you are all children of God in Christ Jesus- For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.- For freedom Christ set us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery-

That paper won me the favor of John Weisengoff, the faculty's holy terror. I became his gofer, his errand boy – a privileged status others envied.

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