

Galatians 5.25–6.2: Bearing One Another's Burdens

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Paul's letter to the Galatians has much to say to the present situation in the Episcopal Church. In the letter, Paul is answering three important questions: How can we know who to believe when it comes to spiritual truth? Second, does it matter who we believe? And thirdly, how does what we believe change the way we live? The four verses from 5.25 to 6.2 come from that part of the epistle that deals with the third question, asking how we live in accordance with the gospel we believe. Paul's answer is summed up in this general principle in verse 25: *live by the Spirit, walk by the Spirit. Keep in step with the Spirit or be guided by the Spirit* are other ways of translating the words Paul actually used. The Spirit Paul is talking about, of course, is the Spirit Jesus was referring to in John's gospel 15 and 16 when He said *the Spirit will take what is mine and declare it to you.... He will bring to your remembrance all I have said to you.... He will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement...* the Spirit that speaks *not on his own authority*, but speaks the words of the Father. Paul says that we are to be guided by the Spirit Who takes what is Christ's and declares it to us, who reminds us of His teaching.

In the verses that follow this, Paul applies this general principle to a particular question: the question of how followers of Jesus behave when they are dealing with someone who has not been guided by the Spirit, someone who is not living by Christ's teaching. That's why I say that this is a highly relevant passage for the Episcopal Church and for the Anglican Communion, and in particular for those of us who will continue living and working together in the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Almost all of us believe we are dealing with those who have not heard the guidance of the Spirit correctly, and appear not to be living by the Spirit.

Paul has to apply this principle to this situation, because the reason why Paul was dealing with these three issues was that some of the Galatian Christians had stopped believing Christ's teachings. Right at the beginning, in verse 1.6, Paul says *I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you ... and are turning to a different gospel*. Other teachers had come after Paul's time there and persuaded the church to believe something different from the gospel Paul had preached—that's why he addresses the issue of 'who can we trust in spiritual things' and 'does it make a difference which gospel we believe.' Here, close to the end of the letter, Paul is reminding the members of the Church who have continued to believe the gospel Paul preached how to live with those who have gone after this new gospel, and even how to draw them back to the right way. Now for our own situation, I would suggest that both sides in the debate over sexuality can apply Paul's words to themselves. Whether you think the wrong path is the one followed by those who support the consecration of the Bishop of New Hampshire or the one followed by those who oppose it is not dealt with in this passage; what is dealt with is how those who are on the right path draw to that path those who are on the wrong path. His appeal to *walk by the Spirit* is followed immediately by a description of what walking by the Spirit means for

people who are right in a church that is wrong. So whether for you it's this diocese that is in the wrong, or the national church that is in the wrong, these verses are worth looking at closely.

First, notice what isn't there: there's nothing about separating from each other. Nothing about going off to found a better church, and nothing about kicking people out. In fact, as you read on it becomes clear that Paul expects the faithful to stay close to the unfaithful, and work to bring them back to the right way. The Spirit's guidance is directly aimed at that.

The first thing that *is* there is this: *Let us have no self-conceit*. Let us not have 'vain glory' is the exact phrase, a phrase which became an English word, a bit old-fashioned now but still very telling: empty glory, glory where there is in fact nothing glorious, groundless self-satisfaction, an opinion of one's self which is simply not justified. Notice the word 'us': Paul is addressing the faithful, the ones who have not fallen for this new gospel. 'Let's not take pride in the fact that we're the ones who are right' is the point he is making. It's only by the grace of God that we aren't following the wrong gospel. It's not because we are smarter than others or more spiritual than others; it's nothing for us to take personal pride in. It's simply more of God's grace that we don't deserve.

And because we have nothing to boast about, even if we are on the side of the truth, Paul goes on to say *let us have no provoking of one another*. 'No challenging one another' is a more accurate way of translating it. The word Paul uses is the word used by athletes when challenging one another to race or to wrestle; and of course that sort of challenge is always resolved by someone winning and someone losing. I know just as if I had been there in person that there were some in the Galatian churches who, as they listened to Paul's letter being read, were rejoicing in being the winners in the dispute: I can see them turning to the person in the pew behind with that 'See, I *told* you!' expression on their faces. 'I've been saying all along this new gospel was baloney, now here's a letter from Paul taking *my* side!' No, says Paul; even for those in the right it is not about *winning*. Challenges, lines drawn in the sand, are very satisfying to those who make them; winning is a wonderful sensation, but in the church they are not what the Spirit is guiding us towards.

Paul ends the verse by saying 'let there be *no envy of one another*.' No coveting another's position, or influence, or authority. Even when we're right, it can still be some personal trait that drives us to make an issue of it, and Paul obviously suspects that personal jealousy is complicating the issue in Galatia. After all, these false teachers have obviously been 'winning'; they are persuasive; they are popular; they have taken over. Even when those in power are in the wrong, it can be envy or some other personal desire that makes us want to pull them down from their high perch—or build a higher perch of our own to sit on.

No Christian is free from these temptations. It's a hard thing for some of us to accept, but the existence of the problem in today's church is not the biggest problem. There will always be a problem. The New Testament is full of letters like this one, letters to churches with moral failings and false teaching, and it assures us such things will always be present. The biggest problem is not the existence of the problem, but the fact that so many of us are tempted to deal with it in step with the world instead of in step with the Spirit. The desire to win, pride in being in the right, anger at being ignored, must not take over.

So Paul goes on to point out the right way to deal with the problem. Verse 6.1 says: *if a man is overtaken in any trespass*, if someone has wronged you, or wronged the church, is not

behaving as he or she should, *you who are spiritual*, you who truly do walk by the Spirit, *should restore him*, bring him back to the right way, *in a spirit of gentleness*. In every Christian church—Episcopal, Catholic, Baptist, Independent, you name it—there are people who are behaving in a less-than-Christian way; what Christ’s Spirit wants is to see those people restored, and we smooth the way for that by treating them *gently*. Regardless of how bad they might be—the Greek actually says ‘if someone is caught in *any* sin.’ Even the worst. Even promoting schism. Even promoting a new sexual morality. The goal of all church discipline is restoration, rehabilitation. Sometimes it is necessary to take serious measures when there has been serious wrongdoing. But even in the worst cases, where clear wrongdoing has been proved and formal discipline, such as excommunication or deposition, is necessary, Paul makes it clear that restoration is still the goal, and even the way we express discipline must invite people to be restored, not challenge them to fight.

Which is why Paul goes on: *Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted*. In the Greek, this whole verse is one sentence, a single thought: ‘if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently, watching yourselves, lest you too are tempted.’ The fault may truly be another’s on this occasion—but how easily it could have been mine! How often it has been mine! How easily I can sin in the very act of condemning the sin of another! Perhaps I’m not at fault this time, but am I setting an example I will be glad others follow when my turn comes, as it probably will? Do I sincerely desire to see that person restored, or do I just want him cast out? Am I praying for God to root out the bitterness and anger in my own heart? The very fact that I think I’m right may tempt me to sin if I’m not on guard.

The next verse is important for us to understand correctly, because it’s such a famous verse, and applied to such a wide variety of situations: *Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ*. This certainly is a principle that can be applied in many different ways, but Paul is using it to talk about dealing with Christians who have fallen into temptation. That phrase in the previous verse, *look to yourself, lest you too be tempted*, is the context for the phrase ‘bear one another’s burdens’: it is the burden of being wrong that we are to help each other bear. We are to bear the burden of the Christian who is in the wrong, bear the burden that the sinful person is bearing. Paul says the same thing when writing to the Romans: referring to those who are weak in faith (verse 14.1), he says *We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves* (verse 15.1). The example there is eating food that had been used as a sacrifice to an idol. Those with a strong faith knew there was nothing wrong with eating such food—idol worship was meaningless anyway—but those with a weak faith were afraid it was wrong. Paul doesn’t tell the weak ones to get over it; he tells the strong ones to give it up for the sake of the other. We bear the burden of the other’s sin, just as Christ bore the burden of ours. ‘Father, forgive them,’ Jesus said as they crucified Him, ‘for they know not what they do.’ ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them,’ said Stephen as they stoned him.

Bear one another’s burdens. To cut ourselves off from those who are wrong is not walking by the Spirit. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard someone say, you know, outside a few places in South Carolina or Pittsburgh or wherever it is, The Episcopal Church is pretty healthy; things are going pretty well. That’s like a man with lung cancer saying ‘outside my lungs, I’m in pretty good health’. The Episcopal Church is *not* outside Pittsburgh or Fort Worth; what’s going on here is part of the reality of The Episcopal Church, just as is what’s going on in New Hampshire. These situations are not only problems, they are also opportunities to bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.

Paul's conclusion comes a few verses later, in Galatians 6.9. It's his conclusion to the whole letter, but applies also to these verses. He says *let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart*. Sometimes it can be very hard to fulfil the law of Christ, to treat fellow-Christians in accordance with the teachings of Christ. We long to give them a piece of our mind; we don't want to be gentle with them. We don't want to turn the other cheek. We do get very weary indeed. But hang in there, Paul says. It will be worth it in the end. Don't lose heart. Hard as it may be, this is the way of the cross. It is the way that Christ walked for us, and of course it's the way He calls us to walk for others. And it is the only way that the goal can be achieved: *we shall reap, if we do not lose heart*.

The mistaken Christians in the Episcopal Church, whoever they turn out to be, will not be restored to the gospel by worldly means, by any devices of our own. Only the Holy Spirit can change anyone. The Spirit speaks in these verses, showing us how we can cooperate with Him in that task. I don't see many on either side of the current divisions showing much willingness to do that. My prayer is that in Pittsburgh, of all places, as we prepare for a fresh start, people will be found who will be willing to break step with the world and get in step with the Spirit, whose first priority is to restore the other to spiritual health rather than glory in our own. Please join me in that prayer.