

# EXEGETICAL BRIEF

## Galatians 5:6

### Reformation Battle Cry: Faith Works!

*Daniel P. Leyrer*

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. <sup>2</sup>Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. <sup>3</sup>Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. <sup>4</sup>You who are trying to be justified by the law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. <sup>5</sup>For through the Spirit we eagerly await by faith the righteousness for which we hope. <sup>6</sup>For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. *The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*

Galatians 5:1-6 (NIV11)

**T**he Second Lesson appointed for Reformation Sunday (November 2, 2014) encourages the preacher to interact with the epistle that was so dear to the Reformer that he lectured on it (at least) four times and referred to it as his Katie von Bora. Luther felt betrothed to Paul's letter to the Galatians, no doubt, because he identified with the battle. The apostle battled for the hearts of first century Christians who were being oppressed by the false teaching of works righteousness. Luther battled for the hearts of sixteenth century Christians who were confused by the same false teaching coming out of the Roman church. In Galatians Paul thunders against any notion that would add people's performance to God's grace in the way a sinner is justified before the Lord. In the Reformation Luther did the same. We Lutheran pastors are almost 500 years removed from the beginning of the Reformation. Yet we understand the urgency to take up Paul and Luther's fight for souls against all those who would attack God's plan for saving people by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

The Second Lesson (CW) for Reformation Sunday this year is Galatians 5:1-6. While this brief will especially deal with Paul's closing description of faith in verse 6b, it would be good for us to make some exegetical notes on the other verses in order to establish the context.

**Verse 1:** Paul begins the "applied theology" section of his letter with a call to spiritual arms, a firm call to defend the ἐλευθερία Christ won for us by his atoning death. Here is a "freedom" from the punishment our

sins deserve, to be sure. Coming as it does on the heels of the Hagar/Sarah allegory (4:21-31), however, it is best to understand this liberty as a freedom from the law. Because of Christ's redemptive work believers never have to view their relationship with God as hinging upon their performance of law works. The Savior whom Zechariah prophesied as one who would "enable us to serve God without fear" (Luke 1:74) has indeed freed us from the chains of viewing God's love as something that must be earned with law works. Later in Galatians 5 Paul encourages us not to use this freedom as a license to sin (5:13-15). But here his encouragement is to stand firm in it. Note the present tense imperatives *στήκετε* and *ἐνέχεσθε* in this verse. The struggle against law religion is constant.

**Verse 2:** Here begins a theological horror story, namely, the horrible ramifications of adding anyone or anything to Christ for our justification. Paul's eyes widen as he tells the tale, referring to himself as *ἐγὼ Παῦλος*, a combination he uses only five other times in his 13 New Testament epistles. By utilizing *ἐάν* plus the subjunctive in his conditional, the apostle warns his readers that while this hasn't happened yet, it certainly could happen if they lost their vigilance. What is this horror to be avoided at all costs? The accepting (present passive *περιτέμνησθε* used in the permissive sense) of circumcision as a "must" for their salvation. What could be more horrible than its result: "Christ will benefit you in no way?" When we, by our misplaced trust, tell Jesus he has not done everything for our salvation, then his divine work on our behalf does us no good.

**Verse 3:** And now a second horror. Trusting law works for our standing with God not only slaps our Savior in the face, but it puts us back in the dungeon of relating to God only through his law. Such a relationship is one of the *ὀφειλέτης*, a debtor. Our ability to pay our debt to God by means of law works is on a par with the king's servant's ability to pay his astronomical debt in Jesus' parable (Matthew 18:23-26). Note how Paul places the infinitive *ποιῆσαι* in the emphatic last position in the verse. Fulfilling the requirements of God's law is not just about having the law or reading the law or studying the law or talking about the law. It's about actually DOING God's law. All of it (*ὅλον*)! Perfectly (*aorist* infinitive *ποιῆσαι*)!

**Verse 4:** Here come horrors three and four. Seeking to (conative sense of present passive *δικαιοῦσθε*) justify yourself by law works is estrangement from Christ and a fall from grace. Undoubtedly the false teachers tried to get the Galatians to buy into the notion that circumcision would mean estrangement from the sinful world. In this verse Paul tells it like it is. Circumcision in these circumstances would mean sinful estrangement from Christ. And rather than placing yourself in God's good graces, such works righteousness would actually be

a precipitous fall from the only grace that saves. Ever the watchman, Paul in verses 2-4 strips the mask away from this pious-sounding false doctrine and exposes its shocking ugliness.

**Verse 5:** Having described the false way of being justified, Paul now reviews the way it truly happens. God's not guilty verdict becomes ours not by our choice but by the Spirit's (πνεύματι) power. This righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) is not earned by human performance but is received through the divine miracle of faith (ἐκ πίστεως). It's not something we work for, it's something we wait for (ἀπεκδεχόμεθα). Note how, in the space of a few words at the end of verse 4 and the beginning of verse 5, Paul has uttered those two watchwords of the Reformation: χάρις and πίστις.

**Verse 6a:** If one is looking for that which has force and power (ἰσχύει) in the realm of justification, one will not find it in outward ceremonial acts, or the lack thereof for that matter. We cannot force God into forgiving us by what we do or what we leave undone. Luther perceptively remarks that this verse excludes hypocrites from Christ's kingdom on both the right and on the left. For Paul exposes the uselessness of putting one's trust in circumcision and the uselessness of putting one's trust in not being circumcised. Placing our trust for eternity in our "churchiness" rather than Christ has no power. But neither does placing our trust in how we have "no use for organized religion." The only effective object of our trust is Christ.

**Verse 6b:** ἀλλὰ πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη.

Here is Paul's climax to our Reformation Sunday Lesson. We might envision the poor, beleaguered Christians of first century Galatia throwing up their hands amidst the confusion being forced on them by the false teachers and crying out: "How *is* a sinner justified before the holy God?!?" Paul's answer, the truth on the matter, is these five words.

ἀλλὰ The strong adversative indicates that Paul's answer is the *exact opposite* of the false means of justification mentioned in the first half of the verse. The *Sola Fide* Paul proclaims has nothing to do with human performance of meritorious works. In fact, faith in Christ is a 180 degree turn from depending on human performance for one's justification. Look for another ἀλλὰ at 6:15 when Paul makes the same point. The ἀλλὰ shuts the door on viewing faith as a human work or even a human decision.

πίστις No article. The apostle wants us to think *essentially* and *qualitatively* about trust in Jesus for our not guilty verdict before the Divine Judge. Just as Paul refrained from the article on περιτομή and ἀκροβυστία in the first half of the verse, so also with πίστις in the second half. It is Paul's invitation for us to compare these contenders at

their very core, to look deep inside them. When we do, we see how human work or ceremony is completely lacking and simple trust in Christ is the only means of forgiveness accepted by God.

δι' ἀγάπης A brief prepositional phrase to modify the verbal that follows. How exactly does our Christian love “work” with our faith in Jesus? Paul states that our love is not the effective cause of our faith, that would be διὰ plus the accusative. Paul states that Christian love is not the actor or agent by which our faith is worked or enacted, that would be ὑπό plus the genitive with a passive participle. By using διὰ plus the genitive here Paul clearly communicates our Christian love to be the instrumental agent through which our faith actively works. Selfless, giving love is the channel through which the Christian’s faith is constantly and eagerly expressing itself. Love flows from faith, not the other way around. Paul’s construction here is very much in keeping with his reference to ἀγάπης as the first *fruit* of the Spirit at 5:22.

ἐνεργουμένη Here is an attributive participle in the last position in Paul’s paragraph, a position of emphasis. Thus, this is very important information about our πίστις in Jesus. It is actively at work all the time! Note the present tense and the middle voice. Much has been written about whether to understand this participle as a middle or a passive. The theologians Luther sparred with wanted it to be understood as a passive, thus making the Christian’s works of charity that which activates the Christian’s faith. The verb ἐνεργέω, however, never occurs in the passive in the New Testament. Compare Paul’s use of the verb here to the way he uses it at Romans 7:5; 2 Corinthians 1:6 and 4:12; Ephesians 3:20; 2 Thessalonians 2:17. The middle voice Paul uses here and everywhere else with ἐνεργέω assures the reader that our loving good deeds are not the power behind our faith. Nevertheless, the apostle wants the Galatians and us to know that Spirit-worked faith is something that is ever growing, busy, and active. Just because faith is not worked by love does not mean it is not constantly working through love.

The truth captured in the five words of Galatians 5:6b is the shortened, Pauline version of James 2:14-26. Both inspired authors emphasize that our justification is received through a living, energetic faith. And this busy faith that is looking for ways to serve its fellowman is the theme of Paul’s concluding exhortation to the Galatians (5:13-6:10).

God bless your preaching of *Sola Fide* on Reformation Sunday! We are justified by faith alone, but faith is never alone in the sense that it is always producing loving good deeds. In a relativistic age that proposes many ways to heaven, we Lutherans need the message proclaimed by Paul and Luther more than ever.