

Peace

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Any study of Galatians in general and “fruits of the Spirit” in particular will be greatly illuminated by the recent work on Galatians by Brigitte Kahl.¹ She proposes that “Galatia” is not, as we were taught in seminary, a territory (northern or southern Asia Minor). The term is rather a sociological category for those who dissent from the dominant social order and who propose to live apart from that system of domination. Thus Paul addresses those who are ready to dissent and live otherwise. More specifically Kahl argues, persuasively I judge, that the “law” that Paul castigates in that epistle is not the Jewish Torah (as much of our past discussion had assumed), but it is the law of the Roman Empire that is a law that enslaves in the service of domination and in an extractive economy: “The law and religion that Paul primarily criticizes are the law and religion not of Judaism but of the Roman Empire.”² Thus Paul writes to address those who have opted to live under the rule of Christ as an alternative to the law of Rome; that alternative is an offer of freedom, so that *the emancipatory Gospel of Jesus* counters *the domination of Caesar*.

Specifically the “desires of the flesh” are attitudes and practices of self-indulgence and self-promotion that were crucial in an honor/shame society. Kahl, following Robert Jewett, sees these “desires” as a yearning to gain superiority in the context of Rome that was “the boasting champion of the ancient world.”³ Paul’s bid, against imperial seduction, is to live as a participant in a generative community rather than in the competitive rat-race of the dominant imperial culture.

I.

Because the “fruit of the Spirit” is the alternative to “the desires of the flesh,” we may begin with the negative in order to see what Paul intended by way of contrast. The Empire of Rome, like every empire, was a macho enterprise that celebrated and rewarded military prowess and that placed great accent on success and superiority in the ways that evidenced virility. This “virtue” was attached to self-promotion, self-indulgence, and self-exhibit at the expense of the other. Roman law was designed to reward those who could master the system and to diminish those who are “left behind” who could not compete. Thus Kahl can judge: “Paul’s entire argument from Gal. 3:28 through 5:15 is then not simply projecting an otherworldly freedom but is part of a coded discourse among the enslaved nations about the spirituality and practice of liberation from the Roman ‘yoke of slavery’” (5:15).⁴

It is not surprising then that “strife” (*eris*, the antithesis of “peace”) should be prominent among the “desires of the flesh.” Success according to Rome norms required “strife”; competition could be abrasive and would readily spill over into violence. In his more theologically programmatic statements, Paul will speak of strife that is practiced among those whom “God gave up” (Romans 1:24, 26, 28) to debasement: “They are filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish faithless, heartless, ruthless” (vv. 29-31). In Romans 13, moreover, amid an argument about

“governing authorities,” Paul can say: “Let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, and not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy” (v. 13). According to Kahl, Paul has in purview the characteristic conduct of both those who dominated Roman social power and those who competed to “catch up.” The church that Paul has in purview in his admonition is a distinct contrast and alternative to that imperial model of well-being based on competition and individual, manly achievement that requires defeat of other competitors, all in a replication of the power and honor of “Caesar.” Paul sees that the church cannot attest the gospel as long as it imitates those modes of life and social relationships.

II.

Paul is a pastoral theologian; while he has, according to Kahl, the big challenge of Rome on his horizon, his energy and passion are mostly devoted to the life of his beloved congregations. The normative value system of Rome (self-advancement, self-promotion, self-exhibit) had effectively penetrated the life of the congregations that are themselves variously marked by strife, dissension, and quarrels.

In the church in Corinth, Paul writes about the wisdom and power of the cross that contradicts the power and wisdom that evoke imperial norms: “For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters” (I Corinthians 1:11; see 3:3). The quarrels arose from choosing up sides among apostolic leaders. In II Corinthians 12:20 Paul reprimands such conduct as a prelude to his lyrical exposition on love as the gospel norm in chapter 13. The contrast he makes in chapters 12-13 is radical and complete.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul contrasts those who proclaim Christ “from good will” and “out of love” with those who do so for self-promoting reasons: “Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. These proclaim Christ out of love, knowing that I have been put here for the defense of the gospel; the others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment” (1:15-17).

The Pastoral Epistles utilize the same rhetoric concerning strife in the church. Those who depart from what the author regards as reliable apostolic teaching are self-promoting: “Whoever teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that is in accordance with godliness, is conceited, understanding nothing, and has a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words. From these come envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among those who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain” (6:3-5).

In Titus, moreover, such strife leads to divisions in the church that are unacceptable to the author who has a passion for unity: “But avoid stupid controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. After a first and second admonition, have nothing more to do with anyone who causes divisions” (Titus 3:9-10). In all of these references, the congregations have too readily imitated the way of the empire and abandoned the way of the cross that is a practical alternative to imperial domination.

III.

It is in the context of such societal seduction that we consider “the fruit of the

Spirit” and specifically “peace” as a fruit of the spirit. Whereas the “virtues of empire” imitated by the church assure parsimony and competition for “scarce goods” (honor, recognition, achievement), the good news of the gospel is the generosity and abundance of God that summons to a corresponding generosity and abundance in the answering church. The generosity and abundance of the Gospel (that of God) and the responsive generosity of the community that embraces the gospel contradict the scarcity system of the empire and make the behavioral patterns of the empire irrelevant and obsolete. Thus “peace” in the life of the congregation (and in “Galatia” among those who refuse the rule of Rome) means to live in harmony and mutual respect, to “look after the interests of others” (Philippians 2:4), and not to insist on the right and domination of one’s own role or opinion.

“Peace” then belongs in the cluster of virtues (habits) that rely on the generosity and graciousness of God and on the guidance of the Spirit who will lead beyond where we are prepared to go. The implication of such communal solidarity is the recognition that one’s own status and one’s own opinion are in fact quite penultimate and must be submitted to the well-being of the congregation. Thus “peace” and its cognate attitudes and behaviors do not add up to a code of conduct. “Peace” is rather a vision of a life of gracefulness that is lived in response to the gracefulness of God. The interaction of God’s initiatory and sustaining gracefulness and a responding gracefulness constitute a profound contradiction to the way of the world that is the way of the dominant system of imperial Rome.

Paul’s great manifesto of freedom means freedom from the lethal bondage to social relationships based on fear and domination: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm therefore and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.... For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another” (5:1, 13). Paul recognizes that freedom from self-indulgence of a combative society is freedom for the neighborhood: “For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another (vv. 14-15).

“Love of neighbor” is the antithesis of self-promotion and self-indulgence that will lead to devouring appetites and policies. Thus, “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (6:2). This is the whole law! It is the law of the new rule of Christ that contradicts the rule of Caesar. Paul’s horizon is closely upon the church; but it also stretches beyond the church to the “good of all,” that is, to the common good: “So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith” (6:10). Paul sees that the alternative conduct of the church has indeed wide implications beyond the sphere of the congregation. The inclusiveness of the baptismal formula of 3:22 is reiterated at the close of his letter with a hope of “peace” for the church: “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything, but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule—peace be upon them—and mercy, and upon the Israel of God” (6:15-16).

I am aware that all of this commentary on the life of the church amounts to a familiar recital of platitudes. The matter is nonetheless urgent in the church because the practice of domination in the church (in imitation of the empire) is such a recurring issue. The issue is joined sharply, for all of its familiarity, in a way that touches deeply

into the reality of church life. Suppose, for example, that domination consists in the exercise of power that readily takes the form of knowledge, that is, power belongs to those who “know better.” Over time the church has specialized in “knowledge as power,” a theme voiced in I Corinthians 13. (“Knowledge puffs up.”) Power—the capacity to control—depends on knowledge—control of data that conjugates as the truth. Knowledge takes many forms in the church:

- the capacity to manage and manipulate policy;
- expertise in things doctrinal in order to assert orthodoxy;
- the management of moral codes that approve or disapprove, exclude or include;
- a long memory that “we have always done it this way”;
- the ability to shade gospel claims into social ideology, liberal or conservative;
- the ability to out-Bible, out-talk, out-imagine, out-remember;
- the capacity to manage technological mysteries and electronic connections.

Every form of social knowledge may move toward absoluteness. Every form of absoluteness, moreover, leads to exclusiveness and eventually a readiness to minimize those who do not measure up, who do not conform or consent to such knowledge as truth. The process of *knowing* and *controlling* and then to *absoluteness* and then to *exclusion* and finally to *wounding* is a ready echo of the imperialism of the world that Paul occupies.

Against such a way of life Paul insists on “neighbor.” What we know of “neighbor,” moreover, does not envision control, power, or knowledge; it concerns faithfulness in relationship, to be found reliable even when not “correct.” The gospel of fidelity has been, in Paul’s time as our own, too much transposed into a gospel of certitude, and certitude has never saved anyone. Thus Paul, in his catalogue of the fruit of the spirit, urges that the church remember and practice gospel faith that is about reliable social relationships, and not about being right, knowing better, having control, or advancing one’s self. Such faithful social relationships entail a certain loss of control for the sake of those whom God has put in front of us. It is impossible to imagine “Caesar” losing control and thereby ceasing to be Caesar. But we have this declaration that God, in God’s self-giving love, has for the sake of love, given up conventional divine control in the cross in order to create new possibilities for creation (Philippians 2:5-11). It is no wonder that the apostolic preaching of the cross and resurrection caused the empire in the book of Acts to tremble. Indeed, the radicality of the fruit of the Spirit that entails loss of control for the sake of neighborliness causes the conventional church to tremble. For such self-giving abandonment might lead to all manner of “objectionable” connections for the sake of neighborliness.

IV.

“Peace” is not simply a Rodney King bid that “we all get along.” “Peace” is not settling for the golden mean or the lowest common denominator. “Peace” is not the avoidance of issues that may cause conflict. “Peace” rather is the offer of the self in fidelity for the sake of the community. There can hardly be any doubt that the “imperial” ways of the world have impinged powerfully upon the contemporary church. The

readiness of the church to divide into “red” and “blue” congregations, judicatories, and denominations is simply a sign that the gospel has been transposed into categories that offer “win-lose” options with losers being excluded. Indeed that the Church Growth Movement proposed forming communities of “like-minded” folk is a reflection of ideological passion that cannot welcome neighbors who are of a different mind. The “fruit of the spirit” is easy (or irrelevant) within communities of the like-minded. It is of course more demanding and more costly in a community of the “other-minded” who parse the gospel in ways different from our own.

Paul, however, is relentless. He will not compromise this defining point. He believes that *The Big Sort* according to opinion, or interest, or ideology is no way to build a church.⁵ “Peace” is the recognition that all of our best convictions are penultimate and finally must yield to the presence of the neighbor.

The wonder of “Word and Sacrament” is urgently to the point. The sacrament is a performance of an open cluster of symbols that give great room for different opinions. As a consequence the church cannot impose too much on the thickness of sacramental symbols. It honors a mystery that is beyond explanation.⁶ But sacrament comes with word. Sacrament comes with interpretation of scripture. Our usual assumption is that the sermon “explains” something of the sacrament. But what if the process is in fact reversed? What if the sacrament illumines the sermon? What if all of our words of proclamation are regularly and knowingly passed through the filter of “blessed and broken,” “blessed” as infused with power beyond us, “broken” as the shattering of our best certitudes. It is such utterance and gesture of “blessed and broken” that permits a genuine festival of life-giving surplus!

If we contrast the “desires of the flesh” with the “fruit of the spirit,” we are promptly plunged into the vortex of scarcity and abundance, or better, into *parsimony and surplus*. The way of the empire, in contrast to the festival of surplus, is a way of scarcity. The empire never intends to distribute “freely,” but always arranges that scarce goods are kept for the powerfully privileged. It is the way of the empire and so the way of the parsimonious church to make sure that entitled people have surplus with cost to the rest. Such a way allows for no peace at all. The gospel way, that Paul champions, is a way of abundance, of a community that need not quarrel because there is enough for all of honor, status, and valorization from which follows enough for all of material requirements. The fact that “loaves abound” in surplus means that there can be love, joy, peace, and patience!

Those who practice such neighborliness are grounded in abundance that emancipates, while the empire of market ideology intends that we will always strive, always be in strife for scarce goods. In the gospel of Mark, after Jesus has fed 5,000 with twelve baskets of surplus and fed 4,000 with seven baskets of surplus, the disciples still cannot compute the surplus of abundance. Jesus says to them in exasperation: “Do you not yet understand” (Mark 8:21)? Mark, in his wisdom, can tell us why the disciples did not get it about gospel abundance: “They did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened” (Mark 6:52).

The disciples are astonished because Jesus’ actions fit none of their categories of explanation. They could not compute the surplus of bread; they could not connect the dots of abundance. And the reason they could not is because “their hearts are hardened.” That is, they are a living replication of Pharaoh, the great master of scarcity who lived with a hardened heart. They trusted scarcity and could not fit the

abundance of Jesus into that purview. Thus it is a contest of *scarcity* (that makes for competitive acrimony) and *abundance* (that makes peace possible). It is an easy move from *remembered Pharaoh* to *present tense Caesar* who remains still the master of administered scarcity that requires strife, jealousy, and competition. Contra Pharaoh and Caesar is the Lord of abundance, offering a world where peace among neighbors is permitted, expected, and plausible.

It is important to recognize that among us market ideology with its passion for commoditization, backed by an immense military investment, marked by an endlessly escalated fear of terrorism that relentlessly calls attention to violence in the neighborhoods wants to keep us on edge, fearful, anxious, on guard, and exclusionary. We can see this fearful anxiety being acted out in society and much too often in the church that imitates society. But all of that is Caesar's big lie! And our kids are seduced in powerful ways into Caesar's big lie.

As I write this Nick Bilton reports on his nephew, ten years old, who is "obsessed" with "Clash of Clans, a super popular game played on smart phones."⁷ His nephew had advanced enough in the clan to be able to exclude some others from his "clan." But then in a narrative reversal, his nephew found he in turn had been excluded from the clan he led; he was preoccupied in anxious ways with his own exclusion. Bilton suggests that such exclusionary action comes "naturally to 10- year-old boys, whether online or in the real world." Such exclusionary action, however, is much more than that. The game is a school for the empire through which our young are inducted into a world of scarcity and violent competition that make peace impossible.

Against such specious world-construction, the real world entrusted to us is a world of abundance where the practice of peace among neighbors is not only mandated but is fully appropriate. The movement of our lives from the "desires of the flesh" (funded by the empire) to "the fruit of the spirit" (gifts given in the gospel) requires a) escaping the grip of Caesar and b) witnessing that loaves abound, fully enough for the neighbor. Such a reality makes a different life possible, a life lived in joy and generosity. As Paul asserts, "There is no law against such things" (5:23). Well, the only law against neighborly generosity is the law of Caesar. But this law of Christ that Paul articulates is alternative to the law of Caesar who sponsors and insists upon on-going strife. We in the church are constantly being talked out of the law of neighborliness, and then we decide yet again for that gospel counter-law. The force of Caesar is powerful; but the "Galatians" knew better!

Notes

1 Brigitte Kahl, *Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

2 Ibid., 257.

3 Ibid., 364, n. 64.

4 Ibid., 256.

5 See Bill Bishop, *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded Americans is Tearing Us Apart* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009).

6 See Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008) concerning the mystery of the sacrament and its ready distortion for the sake of power.

7 Nick Bilton, "Lord of the Screens," *The New York Times* (May 20, 2015).