

Sunday, January 1, 2012: Galatians 4:4-7

by [P. C. Enniss](#) in the [December 27, 2011](#) issue

With all of the pressures of preparing for Christmas Day—the coming and going, the parties and presents—the Sunday following Christmas is welcome indeed. It's a time to stop, take a deep breath, keep one's slippers on a little longer and do nothing. There is good reason people traditionally refer to this Sunday as "Low Sunday," and good reason too that the lectionary writers chose St. Paul's treatise on the primacy of God's unconditional, unmerited, universal, relentless and eternal grace.

Imagine the leader of a major Christian institution declaring on CNN that from now on, before one can become a Christian, one must first become a Jew, submit to the ritual of circumcision and vow to abide by the disciplines of the Mosaic law. Even those who had become Christian Jews without circumcision would have to comply with the new requirements. For many viewers, the announcement would invoke ridicule and create a whole new flood of circumcision jokes. The thoughtfully religious, however, would reject the pronouncement as heresy. It would be heard as law taking precedence over grace.

That is precisely the cultural-religious context in which Paul found himself in Galatia. The Galatian church saw circumcision as a required act that validated one's faith; without it one could not be included.

Today the Galatian "heresy" remains a shadow that still hovers over much of modern religious rhetoric and practice. If not by precept but by implication and intimidation, couldn't we name baptism, confirmation, church attendance or perhaps even pledging as rituals that are necessary before one can be fully accepted?

In earlier days, it would not be uncommon for a minister to be summoned to the bedside of a dying relative with the request that the minister try to pry a confession of faith from the lips of the dying person. If only as a last gasp, the loved one would utter the name of Jesus, and a lost soul could be rescued from the pits of hell and awarded a heaven of eternal bliss. In modern times, the minister's dilemma often comes in the form of a request to conduct a funeral for someone who didn't belong to a church or didn't believe in God.

What's a minister to do? Are only those who are properly documented entitled to the full benefits of God's benevolent grace? What minister is bold enough or legalistic enough to claim that this grace, which God intended for the salvation of all humanity, is so fragile that it cannot stand up to human frailty and unbelief? Isn't a minister or a congregation under obligation to be as gracious to the "undeserving" as God has been gracious to them? Yet is it really fair to faithful, pledge-paying, churchgoing and Bible-reading congregants to offer the church's services to the uncertified?

The debate in the Galatian church is, of course, the theological tug-of-war between faith and works, between law and grace. Paul is adamant. All is grace. Grace is the foundational basis for the good news of the gospel message and the centerpiece of Christian theology. The only validation necessary has already taken place on the cross through the sacrificial and redemptive love of God in Christ. To make the point, Paul employs the human metaphor of family—not just the biological family but also the adoptive family. One who might not have belonged is now lovingly welcomed into the family to enjoy all the benefits of an heir. We are all sons and daughters of God, and thus unconditionally loved as sons and daughters of God. As with any adoption, none of it depends on the child doing anything. Adoption comes as a gift.

There is no more powerful a theological premise than the primacy of God's grace, which always precedes faith. Paul Tillich, who had a theological knack for making the mysterious simple, is never more Pauline than when he adamantly contends that we cannot transform our lives on our own. There is nothing we can or have to do. "It happens; or it does not happen. And certainly it does not happen if we try to force it upon ourselves, just as it shall not happen so long as we think, in our self-complacency, that we have no need of it." Rather, Tillich insists, grace comes as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted . . . by that which is greater than you. . . . Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted! If that happens to us, we experience grace . . . nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but acceptance."

The text ends with Paul recognizing the difficulty of accepting God's unconditional grace when we know how undeserving we are. He presses the adoption metaphor further by insisting that God sends the certifying experience of the Spirit so that we can confidently address God as "Father." Be assured, Paul is not speaking of the Spirit as we speak of "Christmas spirit" in banter at parties and in shopping malls.

Paul's contention is that through the gift of the Spirit of Christ still among us, we are given the power to accept others into the family in the same manner in which we ourselves have been adopted into the family of God.

As my seminary professor Felix Gear used to tell his students: "All is grace. Once that notion gets into your gizzard, life will never be the same again."