

Reflection 25 January 2026

Look up !

Galatians 1 :11-16

May the words of my mouth, and the thoughts of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

This may come as a surprise to you – it did to me – but the study of law is not all bad. One of the useful things it teaches you is that words have particular meanings. Lawyers talk rather pompously of “defined terms”. More significantly, and often overlooked even by lawyers, the study of law teaches the crucial skill of recognising when the law is not the answer.

Let's start with meanings: many churches celebrate the “Conversion of Paul” this Sunday.

If we want to make any sense of our reading from Paul's letter to the Galatians that we heard a moment ago, we need to start by understanding a bit more about what is meant by Paul's “conversion”.

You will remember that Paul was travelling from Jerusalem to Damascus with letters from the high priest authorizing him to arrest any followers of Jesus and bring them back to Jerusalem. Suddenly a light from heaven flashed all around him, he fell to the ground and Jesus spoke to him asking “why do you persecute me”? Paul was led, blind, to Damascus where he was baptized by the believers in Damascus.

Let's begin with what that “conversion” wasn't – Paul was not converted from Judaism to Christianity. That would be simpler to understand, and might even make us feel better because it makes it sound like we are right and the Jews are wrong and it is always nice to be right isn't it ... But it is simply not true. Paul makes several references in his letters (to the Romans, to the Corinthians) to the fact that he continued to live within Judaism and to see himself as a member of the Jewish nation.

So if he wasn't “converted” from Judaism to Christianity, what was this “conversion”? The answer lies in how the meaning of this word has changed over the centuries – when Paul was around (probably between AD 10 and AD 70) and specifically within Judaism, conversion was NOT a change of religion but rather a turning or return WITHIN the covenant with God – an epiphany if you like, a light-bulb moment of understanding, when something suddenly makes sense. An “ah-ha!”

Paul was – he says so in our reading – and continued to be a zealous Jew, devoted to God and unendingly energetic in his work for God. What happened on the road to Damascus, Paul's “conversion”, was not Paul being introduced to a new system, rather

it was God causing Paul to reframe all that he already knew. Paul was someone who had “advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age” – and God caused him to put all that learning together differently. It was an “Ah-ha!” moment of monumental proportions. And that re-framing was earth-shattering to Paul: he had been zealously trying to stamp out some wayward heretics in order to keep God’s faithful, chosen people pure ... and these heretics turned out to have been right. They had seen what God was doing, and Paul, for all his zeal, had not.

A critical point then to understanding this letter is that it is part of an INTERNAL debate – inside Judaism.

So what was this debate?

God sending His son Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah upset the applecart in more than one way. Not only did it create a split in Judaism between those who believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah and those who didn’t, but it also brought faithful Jews who believed in Jesus into direct contact with non-Jews, with Gentiles.

This brought about a huge practical problem and the potential for a second split. In the Judaism of Paul’s time, observance of the Torah, including practices such as circumcision, festival observance, and dietary regulations, were the necessary response to being the chosen people. And the strict application of the law operated as a boundary marker that maintained Israel’s distinct identity, separate from the others.

This would have been fine when the early church was actually a Jewish community which understood that Jesus was the Messiah, which was based around its local synagogue, and which practiced the laws of Judaism. If and when the members of this Jewish community accepted Gentiles into their midst, the newcomer would be expected to conform, and there would be no problem.

But when the trickle of Gentile converts became a flood, and when Paul began to plant whole churches of Gentile believers, what then?

Requiring adherence to Jewish law made sense to the Jewish followers of the Way – but it was an anathema to Paul, the man who had been blown away by the realization that for all his years of zealous adherence to the traditions of his ancestors he had not recognised God’s action on earth.

In his letter to the churches in Galatia, Paul, the man who knew more about Judaism than most, the man who certainly believed in the virtues FOR HIM of Jewish law and rites and practice, was writing to oppose those who risked to turn these same rites and practices into an obstacle for the Gentiles who God had called in His grace.

Paul had realised that the God of Israel was offering salvation to everyone, not just the people of Israel. This was a gift from God – entirely undeserved. By God’s grace, through faith in Christ, anyone could – and can - be saved. This grace is THE most important thing.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is saying that those who have come to the young churches he planted to try to impose Jewish law, rites and practices are not only making the same mistake that he himself made before his conversion, but in making that mistake they are rejecting God's gift of grace.

I said at the beginning of this reflection that studying law can be useful – we have thought about the particular meaning of the word “conversion”, so now let's turn to the second thing you should learn when studying law – the law has its limits – it doesn't do everything. Rules are very important, but they are signposts – they point to the destination, to the purpose.

My wife Katherine reminded me of her first lecture in her first year of studying law in London (I must have been at the pub): the lecturer explained the limits of the law with the following illustration, which I will adapt slightly for our context:

Maybe we should have a sign outside which says “No Dogs”. Seems obvious. This is a place of worship, people come to spend time with God, to engage in collective worship, and we don't want to be distracted by barking and whining, wet-dog smells and possibly little puddles as reminders of their passage. This place is about God, not Dog (quite good that!).

Remember, this is an illustration about how rules work – I'm a dog-person, I'm not starting an anti-dog movement (still, no one wants me to bring my dog to church, trust me).

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If there is a rule which says “No Dogs”, what then of guide-dogs? If they guide their owner to church and possibly to an encounter with God, surely they shouldn't be excluded – especially if by excluding the guide-dog we would also exclude the owner from coming to God in this church?

In this little example both the value of the rule – and its limitations – are apparent. The “No Dogs” rule clearly needs to be applied with an eye on its purpose, and not as an end unto itself.

This was exactly the issue that Paul was tackling as he pushed back on those trying to bring Jewish law into the young churches in Galatia. And it is not a first century problem – it is alive and kicking today.

Let me explain:

I am a fan of liturgy. I quite like a bit of formality (although I'm not convinced that God only speaks Latin or that His English-language skills stopped evolving in the 17th century). I personally find these things helpful as I try to connect more with God, be more open to God's word, as I try to understand how I am to follow His way.

And I am an Anglican – I like the way that Anglicans think about things, I like the history of Anglicanism, I find the Anglican take on many questions helpful as I try to live faithfully.

Laws, rules, rites can also provide structure for discipline, and I am convinced that personal discipline is a part of living faithfully. Rules are also necessary for society to function and corporate discipline is a part of living faithfully together.

But the liturgy I love, the church tradition to which I adhere, the laws, rules and rites which promote discipline are all only signposts – they point to something beyond themselves – they point to God. They must never become their own purpose.

Following the law, head down, can cause you to miss the bigger picture, as it would have done for Paul but for God's intervention. It is important to preserve the church for the purposes of giving glory to God – but if the enforcement of a 'No Dogs' rule causes us to keep a partially-sighted child of God out of the church, it will be clear that we have got it wrong, that we are focusing on the sign and not on what it is pointing to.

Paul's conversion was when he realized that he'd been so focused on the signpost that he'd lost sight of what it was pointing at. Paul initially thought that the discipline and purity of God's chosen people was of paramount importance ... so much so that he missed what God was doing. It was only when God knocked him off his horse on the road to Damascus that Paul came to understand that what is important is God's grace. It was only when God blinded Paul that he was able to look up and see.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is a cry from the heart. It was written to the churches in Galatia in the middle of the first century AD, but it could just as well have been written to us. Look up! Paul says – don't focus on the signpost, look up at what the sign is pointing to. God has fulfilled His promise to His chosen people and offers salvation to the whole earth through His son Jesus the Messiah. Focus on this. How appropriate at the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity! Faith in Jesus is what it is about – it is the only thing that matters and the thing which brings us all together. There are lots of signposts, many helpful signposts, but they are of secondary importance. There are lots of church traditions, also helpful in different ways, but they are also only of secondary importance. What matters is that they all point to God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Look up!

Amen