



Until Christ be formed in you (part 1)

With Bishop Ronald K. Powell

Our Text: Galatians 4:12-20;

Brethren, I beseech you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are. You did me no wrong; you know it was because of a bodily ailment that I preached the gospel to you at first: and though my condition was a trial to you, you did not scorn or despise me, but received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus. What has become of the satisfaction you felt? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me. Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth? They make much of you, but for no good purpose; they want to shut you out, that you may make much of them. For a good purpose it is always good to be made much of, and not only when I am present with you. My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you! I could wish to be present with you now

and to change my tone, for I am perplexed about you.

I think the basic reason why Christian faith meets with opposition in the world and even finds resistance in our own hearts is that true saving faith always brings with it the reshaping of our heart and mind so that it is no longer we who live but Christ in us.

There is in every human heart an intense and powerful love for the praise of men. Just as naturally as apples fall downward, human beings gravitate toward ideas and actions which make them look great, and resist ideas and actions which make them look small.

Therefore, apart from the powerful grace of God overcoming our natural disposition to pride, we would always resist the coming of faith into our

lives, because by faith Christ takes such dominant control of our lives and reshapes us so much into his image that we can no longer boast in anything good that we do.

It does not appeal to the natural mind to be so transformed by Christ that we must give him credit for all the good we do.

Catering to Pride

This is the fundamental stumbling block to Christian faith-which is what Jesus meant when he said in **John 5:44**, "**How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God**"?

Our love for the praise of men hinders us from trusting Christ because the purpose of Christ is to remove every ground of boasting in us and put it all in God (1 Corinthians 1:29-31; Ephesians 2:8-9; Galatians 6:14).

He did this once by accomplishing our redemption on the cross without our help; and he continues to do it by applying that

redemption to our hearts without our help. By his sovereign grace Christ paid our debt to God, and by his sovereign grace he is putting his own form upon our lives so that we will say with the **psalmist (115:1), "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory."**

Saving faith is a resting in that sovereign work of Christ, past, present, and future, which gives all glory to God (**1 Peter 4:10, 11**).

Therefore, in one sense saving faith is the easiest thing in the world-as easy as being clay in the potter's hands. But in another sense it is the hardest thing in the world, because human clay hates being shaped and formed by Christ so that he gets all the glory for what we become.

It's not surprising, then, that the Judaizers should find a foothold for their false teaching in the hearts of the recent Galatian converts, just like all kinds of cults and egocentric fads are able to gain a foothold in the church today.

The teaching of the Judaizers did not oppose the pride left in the Galatian believers. It catered to that pride. They said, move on from faith to works; move on from the power of the Holy Spirit and kick in with the efforts of your flesh (**Galatians 3:1-5**).

They offered the law as a means of enjoying one's pride in a morally acceptable way. And so, their teaching was not as radical and humbling as Paul's was. It was very appealing to people who wanted to be religious and moral but did not want to become putty in the hands of God.

Not Us but Christ

In **Galatians 4:12-21** Paul continues his effort to rescue the Galatians from the false gospel of the Judaizers. The main point of

the paragraph is found in **vs. 12 and 19**. **Verse 12 says. "Brethren, I beseech you, become as I am, for I also have become as you are."**

It was a terrible irony to Paul that he, a Jew, had become a Gentile, as it were, to win the Galatian Gentiles (**1 Corinthians 9:21**). But they were now trying to become Jews in order to win God's favor.

Paul reminds the Galatians in **verse 12** that the very fact that he did not depend on his Jewish distinctive should make them forsake the Judaizers and **become as he is-free in Christ**. That's the main point: become free like me.

But **verse 19** puts it in a way that shows why freedom from the law does not result in self-glorifying lawlessness. **"My little children with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you!"**

When Paul says in verse 12, "Become as I am," he means, "Let Christ be formed in you."

My evidence for this is **Galatians 2:20**

where Paul tells us how he understands his own life: **"I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."**

What is clear from this verse is that when Paul says, **"Become like me,"** he means, **"Die like I have died and live by faith in the Son of God so that it is his life in you that shapes and forms who you are."**

Paul's whole ministry was like a mother in labor pains-he travailed

to give birth to people who had Christ taking shape in their lives.

"My little children, with whom I am in travail again until Christ be formed in you." That's the main point of the paragraph. "Become as I am: have Christ formed in you."

This message was diametrically opposed to the teaching of the Judaizers.

We can see this by contrasting **verses 17 and 19**. In **verse 17** Paul uncovers a motive in the Judaizers which is not surprising in view of their theology of works. **"They make much of you, for no good purpose; they want to shut you out, that you may make much of them."**

Paul says that at root the Judaizers are motivated by the love for human praise. They want to be made much of, to be sought out, to be depended on. And to get this kind of ego-building attention they tell the Galatians they will be shut out from God's final blessing if they don't accept their teaching of works.

So every Galatian Gentile who capitulates and gets circumcised in hope of making points with God is another notch in the Judaizers pistol of pride.

That's what **Galatians 6:13** means when it says,

"For even those who receive circumcision do not themselves keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may glory in your flesh."

The very theology they propagate is rooted in pride, since it urges people to depend partly on God and partly on themselves; and therefore, it is inevitable that this motive for propagating that theology would also be rooted in pride, namely, the desire to be made much of. A theology which boosts the human ego and, therefore, caters to our desire for praise will surely be propagated

out of that same motive; and that's the point of **verse 17**.

But contrast this with the heart of Paul's message in **verse**

19-his longing is not that he be made much of, but that Christ be made much of.

O, that Christ would be formed in you (cf. 1:10). **What is this experience Paul is talking about here?**

There is a lot of talk today, especially on seminary campuses, about "spiritual formation." I want to say a hearty yes to this concern, provided that it means the formation of Christ in the believer. O, that Christ would be formed in you!

The biblical quest for spiritual formation is a quest to be so shaped from within by the presence of the living Christ that we are no longer **"conformed to this age but are transformed by the renewal of our mind"** (Romans 12:1, 2): to be so shaped by our union with him that "the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies" (2 Corinthians 4:10); to be so formed and dominated by Christ that we must say with Paul after a life of labor, **"It was not I but the grace of God which is with me"** (1 Corinthians 15:10). **"It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me"** (Galatians 2:20). **"I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has wrought through me"** (Romans 15:18).

It doesn't take a genius to see that, when Christ shapes and forms our inner life after his own image, our freedom from the law will hardly result in a lawless, self-glorifying license.

On the contrary, it

is the power of Christ living and reigning and forming himself within us that frees us to delight in God's will. We are freed from the burden of the law when we are given the power to fulfill it from within. And that happens when Christ is formed in us.