

### **The Boundary Breaking Good News**

In spite of the ongoing advancement of human civilization, there is a human tendency that is seemingly operative in opposition to that advancement. That is the tendency to make some things unnecessarily complicated. While this has been true throughout human history, even in our world today where more and more technology and automation is at our fingertips, all supposedly designed to simplify daily living, sometimes the exact opposite emerges.

When I posed the question, “What is unnecessarily complicated?” to the Reddit website, I found a surprising array of responses. Here’s a representative sample. Perhaps you can resonate with some of them.

- Resolving credit card fraud.
- The US tax code.
- clamshell packaging.
- Cancelling your cable service or internet service provider.
- Quitting a gym.
- Applying for college.
- Applying for college financial aid.
- Creating new passwords:  
"Your password must be at least 10 characters long and must contain at least 1 number, 1 capitalized letter, 1 Egyptian hieroglyph, a haiku and the blood of a Targaryen."
- The US voting system.
- Putting on a hospital gown.
- Microsoft Office.
- and to be fair: iTunes.
- Human courtship.
- Getting married.

Maybe because we’re intelligent and complex beings, we feel a need to demonstrate that in how we go about our daily living. Or perhaps if something is straightforward we feel that there must be more to it than meets the eye.

This even happens within the Christian church itself and it’s what happened in the early decades of the Christian church as it came to be established and began to spread. And this is what is at the heart of the Letter to the Galatians. This early letter written by the apostle Paul is going to be the basis for our worship for the next few Sundays.

There is much contained in this letter that is a helpful reminder to us today to keep it simple and to guard against making it unnecessarily complicated.

Unlike some of the other letters of Paul that are addressed to the Christians within a specific city—such as Corinth, Thessalonika, or Rome—this letter was written to the churches that Paul had started in a particular region of the Roman province of Galatia—it’s part of what would be central Turkey today. We don’t know how many churches Paul started there and we don’t know any of the specific

locations of those churches. But knowing Paul, he would have been zealous in establishing as many churches as he could within the time he had. And as was his custom, once he got the churches started, he stuck around until he felt that they were strong enough to be sustained going forward.

Paul wrote letters to the churches as a way of keeping in touch with them as well as to encourage them. Often there is something in particular that prompts Paul to write these letters. And usually that particular something is a concern or problem that he feels must be addressed.

In the case of the Galatians letter, Paul is writing because word has gotten back to him that after he left the region some other Christian missionaries arrived in Galatia and began to preach a different message than what Paul had preached. These missionaries were Christians who understood Christianity as the next phase in the development of Judaism. While they believed that Jesus was the fulfillment of the promises of a messiah that are contained in the Jewish scriptures, they did not perceive a fundamental shift away from traditional Judaism. In a nutshell, what these missionaries were preaching is that contrary to what Paul had taught, those who wish to be Christians must first become Jews and work for the fulfillment of the Law. This meant that for anyone wishing to become a Christian who had no rootedness within Judaism must first become Jews, including the mark of circumcision. This was a particularly relevant matter because there is every indication that the churches that Paul had started were made up of Gentiles—meaning non-Jews—who had become Christians.

When word of this gets back to Paul he is furious and calls what these missionaries are proclaiming to be a perversion of the gospel. And with those fighting words he takes on this matter in a valiant effort to restore the simplicity and purity of the gospel—namely that there are no prerequisites for membership in the church of Jesus Christ. Professed faith in Jesus Christ is all that is needed for one to be baptized and received into the body of believers.

In this opening part of the letter to the Galatians, Paul goes to great lengths to establish again his credentials for proclaiming this message—a message that he received directly from Jesus himself in a revelation. Because of this, his message has not been corrupted or modified by those of human origin. It's almost as if Paul is acutely aware of our human tendency to make things more complicated than they need to be.

So here we are 2000 years later, and the message of Paul in Galatians is as relevant today as it was in his day. From time to time over the course of Christian history the church has gotten hung up on the straightforward message of grace, by adding additional criteria or qualifications for inclusion in the body of Christ. Sometimes those criteria have had to do with physical characteristics like race and gender. Other times they have had to do with behavior and practice. Sometimes they have been institutionalized and incorporated into official documents considered essential to the faith. More often though they have been more insidious as they were implemented more subtly and surreptitiously.

Well intentioned Christian missionaries of sorts in our day have wrestled with the simplicity of the gospel message and have muddied it as a result as well. So much so that there is an emerging phenomenon within our culture in this new millennium of those who no longer want anything to do with church or institutionalized Christianity. While some of these are totally secular and have no awareness of or appreciation for the sacred, others consider themselves very aware of the sacred within their lives. They just don't have any organized or intentional way in which to live that out with others.

Renee Roederer is a Presbyterian minister in Ann Arbor, Michigan who has written about this in *Presbyterian Outlook*. You may have heard mention of a category of people who when asked their religious affiliation answer, “none.” These are folks who have found no resonance or home with any established religion, many of whom also do not identify as agnostic or atheist. In other words, they are people who are interested in spirituality, but have found no place to exercise that spirituality with others in any intentional way. This group has become known by the Pew Research Center as the nones: n-o-n-e-s.

There’s yet another group emerging that is related but not identical. This group is known as the dones: d-o-n-e-s. “Dones are those who have maintained their religious identity (many of them Christian), but have left established, institutional religious settings like churches.” (“NONES AND DONES: find God-breathed belonging,” by Renee Roeder, *Presbyterian Outlook*, May 9, 2016, p. 23)

“Sociologists Josh Packard and Ashleigh Hope. . . put a spotlight on ‘the dones’ and researched their stories. . . . A painful theme emerged in their research. Many dones came to believe that leaving the church was the only way to preserve their spiritual health. After trying to stay, they felt they had to leave when churches condemned their questions of faith, practiced judgment or refused to share power and leadership.” (*ibid.*)

Many of these nones and dones are thoughtfully spiritual people who have found that their experience of institutional Christianity had become unnecessarily complicated. The profound simplicity of the gospel message had become obscured and corrupted, as it had been many times in Christian history.

Renee Roederer had the idea of providing the opportunity for nones and dones in southeast Michigan to come together for friendship and spiritual conversation. Using social media she promoted what she called “a community for those who are spiritually curious but institutionally suspicious.” (*ibid.*) After a few small gatherings, there was a larger one that caught her by surprise. She writes, “I could not have anticipated this, but only one question was required to open the stories that participants desired to share. I simply invited people to introduce themselves asking: ‘Do you self-identify as a none, a done, something in between or something else?’ And miraculously, that simple question opened a world of spiritual stories [some quite painful]. For an hour and a half, one by one, every person felt free to tell the stories of their spiritual journeys. It was powerful. The conversation took my breath away, yet it was deeply energizing.” (*ibid.*)

Many in our day have decried the decline of Christianity in our society today. Many have concluded that the church is experiencing a long, slow death. It is more likely that the church as we know it is being shaken awake by those who have recognized an unnecessary complexity within the contemporary practice of Christianity.

It’s time that we encounter again the powerful message of Paul to the Galatian churches. I pray that as we do that over the next few weeks that we will recognize opportunities to acknowledge and put into practice the simple and yet profound message of God’s amazing inclusive love and grace given to us in Jesus.

Caleb Miller, a Christian pastor and blogger, whose blog is entitled [theimperfectpastor.com](http://theimperfectpastor.com), has written something that Paul would embrace and that we can embrace as well. He writes, “At the end of the day . . . I’d rather be excluded for who I include than included for who I exclude.” (Caleb Miller, [www.theimperfectpastor.com](http://www.theimperfectpastor.com))

May it be so for us as well.

Jesus said:

Ask, and you will receive;

seek, and you will find;

knock, and the door will be opened to you.

God abounds in love and mercy

and welcomes our return,

for in Christ, God came to us

that we might have abundant life.

*(Matt. 7:7; Luke 11:9)*