

Today we are going to continue reading Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, what we call Galatians. Last week we read from the first 10 verses and today we are going to read through the end of chapter 1. This letter is written by Paul to churches in the region of Galatia. The area of Galatia would be found in what is the modern day country of Turkey.

We noted last week that Paul usually writes letters to specific people and that he always begins his letters with a word of "thank you." However, this letter contains neither of those things. This letter is written to a general audience and Paul begins his letter by being very critical of them.

Paul is writing this letter to an emerging Christian community that has questions about what should their relationship be to the ancient Jewish traditions. They are wondering if they have to become Jewish in order to become Christian. They are wondering if the Jewish laws and customs are important for them to follow.

Read Galatians 1:11-24

In a recent article in the *Atlantic* magazine, the authors of the article were interested in learning more about young adults who claim to be atheists. To gain insight, the authors sought out members of the Secular Student Alliances and Freethought Societies. These college groups are the atheist equivalents to many Christian campus groups.

They meet regularly for fellowship, they encourage one another in their unbelief, and they even witness to others on campus. Very much like most campus Christian groups. Very much like the Christian campus group that I was a part of in college. They are very active in their non-religious beliefs. The authors wanted to hear the stories of these young people and how they came to unbelief in God.

I invite you to hear the story of one of these young men of unbelief. This is the story of Phil.

Phil was described as a smart and likable young man. He was now the president of his college's chapter of the Secular Student Alliance. Phil was once the president of his Methodist church's youth group. He loved his church because he said they weren't just "going through the motions", he loved his pastor who he described as "a rock star trapped in a pastor's body" (not sure I have ever been described that way) and, most of all, he loved his youth leader, Jim who he described as "a passionate man".

Jim's Bible studies were particularly meaningful to him. Phil admired the fact that Jim didn't dodge the tough chapters or the tough questions. Phil said his youth director Jim didn't always have satisfying answers or answers at all, but he didn't run away from the questions either. Phil liked that.

When the author of the article was listening to Phil, the author had to remind himself that Phil was an atheist, not a seminary student recalling those who had inspired him to enter the pastorate. As Phil continued his story, it became clear where things came apart for Phil.

During his junior year of high school, the church, in an effort to attract more young people, wanted Jim, the youth director, to teach less and play more. Difference of opinion over this new strategy led to Jim's dismissal. Jim was replaced by Savannah, an attractive twenty-something who, according to Phil, "didn't know a thing about the Bible." The church got what it wanted: the youth group grew. But it lost Phil.

According to the authors of the study, Phil's story was typical of the stories they would hear from students across the country. The authors made several conclusions about today's young adult atheists including these:

1. Most of the participants who were now atheists had attended church. They left the Christian faith not because of Islam, or Buddhism, or New Age beliefs but because of Christians.

2. Today's young adult atheists felt that their churches had offered superficial answers to life's situations.

3. Today's young adult atheists appreciated Christian leaders who took the Bible seriously and struggled with following it.

I was intrigued by this article after reading Paul's words to the Galatians this morning. In what we have read, Paul describes himself as being a zealous follower of his religious traditions. He had been raised in the Jewish faith and he believed that it was his responsibility to defend that faith. He describes how he was a violent persecutor of the church and how he was trying to destroy it because he believed that the followers of Christ had it all wrong.

But then Paul describes how he came to understand that God had set him apart from the time that he was in his mother's womb. He describes how God gave him a purpose. He describes somewhat his conversion to Christianity and about how it was hard for him to be heard by others because of what he had done in the past.

He describes how many Christians did not trust him because of the way he had lived his life in the past. He describes how it was hard for him to be a missionary because he felt that people were judging him because of his past.

There was a good reason why people were skeptical of Paul. After all, he had done and said some pretty bad things against Christians. Paul had built up a pretty bad reputation. But ultimately Paul's past became something that God used to teach others about the power of transformation that Christ provides.

Paul's story and Phil the atheist's story have something to teach us I think. The first thing I think we learn is that we don't need to teach a watered down entertainment version of Christianity. There are many churches that are flourishing by teaching that brand of Christianity light. Some of those churches are in our area.

By Christianity light, I mean churches that are more interested in entertaining people on Sunday morning than challenging them. By Christianity light, I mean churches that are more interested in providing simplistic answers without looking at issues from different viewpoints. By Christianity light, I mean churches that are teaching that Christianity is simply about believing in Jesus but not putting his difficult and challenging teachings into practice.

Are we teaching young and old about what being a Christian is all about? Are we teaching youth and adults how to be an example at school, at work, and in the community? Are we teaching about how to stand up against injustice and encouraging one another to create positive transformation in the world like Christ models for us?

The second thing that I think Paul the evangelist and Phil the atheist teach us is that we need to hear the stories of people before we judge them. Paul persecuted Christians because he felt that this is what God wanted him to do. He then heard the voice of God who showed him that what he was doing was not what God wanted him to do with his life. He learned that his past was part of him but that his past did not define his present nor predict his future.

Phil the atheist teaches us that many times people come to unbelief in God as a response to what they have seen in Christians. Do you know that Gandhi was interested in Christianity until he went to South Africa and saw how the white South African Christians were treating their brothers and sisters? Are we in the Christian church quick to judge the actions of others? Are we in the Christian church quick to stereotype others? Are we in the Christian church willing to make generalizations about others without hearing the stories of others?

The answer is that, “yes, we do that.” Every one of us makes generalizations about others without hearing their stories. I have appreciated getting to know you because each of you has challenged my assumptions about groups of people that I have stereotyped. We listen to the stories of others with an openness to having our assumptions challenged.

Paul did not run from his past. God used his past as a way to help people learn about God and God’s grace. As Paul reminds us in the words that we read, “they glorified God because of me.”

Be open to the ways that God is using you to show God’s love to others and to transform the world in your own special way. AMEN.

+++++

-Taunton, Larry, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/06/listening-to-young-atheists-lessons-for-a-stronger-christianity/276584/>

-Given: June 9, 2013 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)