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# Congregational vitality – a perspective from Galatians

## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this study is to shed light on the development of “an ecclesiology from below” for our time from the Letter to the Galatians. For this purpose, Schoemans’ view of “an ecclesiology from below” is taken as point of departure, namely that it is “a theology lived and experienced in the faith community” (Schoeman 2020:102). To achieve this, the ecclesiology of the letter is scrutinised for aspects that might be relevant for communities of faith in our time. The following aspects are identified and discussed: God’s calling as the point of departure; the centrality of the gospel; the importance of “the hearing of faith”; the role of ritual, and the guidance of the Spirit.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is an honour to dedicate this brief study of the ecclesiology of Galatians to Prof. Kobus Schoeman. Both of us enrolled for our theological training at the University of the Orange Free State in 1978, completed our theological studies together several years later, and at a later stage became colleagues in the Faculty of Theology and Religion at this university. One of the focal points of Schoeman’s research and scholarly contribution to congregational studies is a continued emphasis on the importance of developing an ecclesiology from below – for him a vital precondition for congregational vitality. In one of his publications, he explains this as follows:



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The self-understanding of a congregation is a vital aspect in developing an ecclesiology from below as it is not prescriptive from above as required in a hierarchal or autocratic process. Such a self-understanding of a congregation may be described as a theology lived and experienced in the faith community ... The focus is on the way the faith community is doing theology as part of its calling and ministry (Schoeman 2020:102-103).

Developing such an ecclesiology from below is not an easy task and, in some instances, may even give rise to severe conflict. In this contribution, I wish to draw attention to the way in which Paul attempted to steer a community of faith in Galatia many centuries ago – in Schoeman’s words – in “doing theology as part of its calling and ministry”. From Paul’s letter, it is clear that this was not an easy process and that the ecclesiologies in conflict in Galatia – those of Paul and of his (Christian!) opponents – were miles apart, since they differed greatly in their understanding of God’s grace, faith, and the law/works of the law.<sup>1</sup> In this contribution, I wish to highlight five important issues underlying Paul’s ecclesiology in the letter. Due to limited space, I will not develop them in detail, but merely draw attention to the aspects I deem to be the most relevant for the topic under discussion. I trust that this “snapshot” of an ecclesiology in practice may help shed light for congregations struggling with different challenges in our time.

## 2. THE POINT OF DEPARTURE: GOD’S CALLING

For Schoeman, the necessity of responding *theologically* to the question of what a congregation is all about, has always been important. According to him, a congregation’s identity should be understood in terms of its relationship to God: “A congregation exists in the presence of, and in relationship with the triune God” (Schoeman 2015a:73; see also Schoeman 2020:101-102). That this is indeed true is confirmed by the ecclesiology of Galatians, as its point of departure is the notion of God’s calling. The idea that God called Paul and the Galatians believers is a golden thread running through the letter and forms the backbone of Paul’s argument in the letter.

Interestingly, the letter has a quite positive view of God – something that one would not expect in a letter drenched in “red-hot rhetoric” (see Cosby 2002:296), in which Paul “pastors with a big stick” (see Bird & Dunne 2017:71). According to Paul, it was God’s will that humankind would be set

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1 For a good overview of the background and nature of the conflict between Paul and the congregations in Galatia, see Schnelle (2014:282-288).

free from the present evil age (1:4), God calls people (1:6), justifies them (2:16ff.), gives them the Spirit (3:5; 4:6), redeems them from the curse of the law through Christ (3:13), blesses them (3:14), adopts them as his spiritual children (4:5; see also 3:16), makes them his heirs (4:7), knows them (4:9), frees them spiritually (5:1), and creates them anew (6:15).

In this section, in particular, the emphasis falls on God's calling: Paul and the Galatian believers were called by God. That this is Paul's point of departure in the letter may be due, to some extent, to the fact that it seems as if his opponents questioned his apostleship – either by rejecting that he was called by God or by claiming that his calling was not recognised by the church (see, for example, Dunn 1993:22-23). However, more importantly, Paul's reaction regarding this issue reflects a theological point of departure upon which everything else in the letter is based.

On the one hand, he maintains that he was called by God to be an apostle, and that this was due solely to God's grace – the term that Dunn (1995:31) so aptly calls “the word which more than any other encapsulates the attitude and activity of God as expressed in the gospel”. Scholars often point out the significance of God's calling in Paul's life and this is indeed valid. If this perspective is ignored, one will not be able to understand Paul's view of his leadership role correctly. To cite but one example: Grieb (2005:155) refers in this regard to the effect of the “disrupting nature of grace” in Paul's life.

In Galatians, Paul focuses the attention of the Galatians upon his calling right at the outset of the letter with the self-description “an apostle, not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father ...” (1:1). It is important to take note of Paul's clear distinction between human and divine in this instance. Later in the letter, he explains his experience of his calling in more detail when he maintains that the gospel that he proclaims is not of human origin, but that he received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. In particular, in 1:15-16, he describes what happened in his life: God setting him apart from his mother's womb (like an Old-Testament prophet<sup>2</sup>) and then calling him through his grace, revealing his Son in/to<sup>3</sup> him, so that he might proclaim him among the non-Jews. One finds several very important theological concepts clustered together in this instance: calling, being set aside, grace, revelation of God's Son, and Paul's missiological task. In our time, congregations would be spending their time wisely if – on

2 It seems as if Paul has Jeremiah 1:5ff. and Isaiah 49:1 and 5 in mind, in this instance. See, for example, Meiser (2007:72).

3 The Greek expression may be translated as “in me”, “to me” or “by me”. See Keener (2019:54). To me, the first two make the best sense.

their journey to congregational vitality – they reflect carefully on how these theological concepts should be appropriated at present,<sup>4</sup> as, like Paul, believers are also called.

In fact, Paul refers explicitly to the calling of the Galatian Christians in his letter. Two passages deserve our attention. In the first instance (1:6), Paul expresses his disgust about the fact that the believers in Galatia have been turning so quickly to a different gospel. He refers to their acceptance of his gospel earlier as a calling in the grace of Christ.<sup>5</sup> One may understand the term “in”, in this instance, in an instrumental sense (*i.e.* by means of the grace of Christ), but in light of 1 Corinthians 7:15 and 1 Thessalonians 4:7, it seems better to interpret it, in this instance, as meaning “into” (so, correctly, De Boer 2011:40). God thus called the Galatians into the grace of Christ. In this instance, grace is understood as a sheltering space, an area of salvation. God called them out of the sphere influenced by sin and the law into the sphere influenced by his grace (for more detail, see Eckstein 2017:19). In the second passage (5:13), Paul points out that the Galatians have been called to freedom. “To” denotes purpose: God called them, so that they would be spiritually free. In this instance, Paul has in mind primarily freedom from the law (*i.e.* from circumcision and other laws) (Schreiner 2011:332).

### 3. THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL

That the gospel is central to Paul’s argument in the letter is evident from the fact that he turns to this issue immediately after the salutation of the letter,<sup>6</sup> even omitting the thanksgiving that is normally found at the beginning of his letters.<sup>7</sup> He expresses his disgust about the fact that the Galatian Christians are already turning to a different gospel, only to correct himself immediately: there is no other gospel; the opponents are perverting the

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4 See Towey (2009:48-57) as an example of the way in which Paul’s experience of the Damascus event may be appropriated for pastoral ministry in our time.

5 The manuscript evidence is divided. The options are: “in the grace of Christ”, “in the grace of Jesus Christ”, “in the grace” or “in the grace of God”. See the discussion by Meiser (2007:51). I accept the first option, but any other choice would not make any difference to the theological perspective emphasised earlier.

6 In a sense, Paul already mentions the gospel in the salutation, since he refers to its content in 1:4-5: that Christ gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age.

7 The absence of a thanksgiving in Galatians is striking and Paul might have intended its omission as a way of rebuking the audience. However, it is an open question whether they would have realised that something was missing, in this instance, as they were probably not aware of his habit of including a thanksgiving in his letters. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Tolmie (2005:38-39).

gospel of Christ (1:6-7). To emphasise the dangerous situation in which the Galatians found themselves, Paul uses a twofold curse, condemning even an angel from heaven if he would dare to proclaim a gospel contrary to his (1:8-9). Further on, in 1:11-17, he emphasises that he received the gospel through a revelation of Christ. In 2:1-10, he recounts his (second) visit to Jerusalem, how he laid his gospel before the leaders in Jerusalem and firmly stood for the truth of the gospel, opposing the false believers who were spying on the freedom that believers had in Christ. He stresses that the leaders in Jerusalem did not add anything to his gospel. Instead, they realised that he had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised. They also recognised the grace that God had bestowed upon him and reached an agreement with him and Barnabas.

For our investigation, Paul's continued emphasis on the singularity of the gospel should not go unnoticed. For him, there is only one gospel; no other gospel exists (1:6). What makes this gospel so unique? Three aspects should be highlighted: its origin, its content, and its effect:

Regarding the *origin* of the gospel, Paul is adamant: his gospel is not of human origin, he did not receive it from a human being, nobody taught it to him; instead, he received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ (1:11-12). The keyword is "revelation", *i.e.* the gospel was "unveiled" to Paul in an apocalyptic event when God "revealed" the true identity of Christ to him and put his former way of life to an end, giving him a new task (De Boer 2011:78-79). The reason why Paul puts so much emphasis on the divine origin of the gospel is that it puts the crisis in Galatia in a new perspective. From Galatians, it is evident that there were conflicting interpretations of the gospel in Early Christianity. These contradictions did not only arise at intra-church level but were also linked in different ways to apostles. Paul's point is that congregations should cling to the truth of the gospel (see 2:5) and that it takes precedence even over apostolic witness and behaviour.<sup>8</sup>

The *content* of the gospel is indicated clearly in 1:7, where Paul refers to it as the gospel of *Christ*. This genitive may be understood as either objective (Christ is the content of the gospel) or subjective (Christ is the source of the gospel) or both. The last option seems best, but if one must

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8 For a thorough discussion of this issue, see Eckstein (2017:36-37). Paul's version of the Antioch incident (2:14-21), in which case he disagreed with Peter, illustrates the importance of this perspective. Even though Peter was an apostle, Paul depicts him as standing "self-condemned" (before God; see 2:11).

pick only one of the two, the objective sense is the best choice.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the content of the gospel is Christ, in particular the salvation effected by and through him. In the letter, Paul uses a variety of images and metaphors to explain this: Christ gave himself for the sins of humanity to set them free from the present evil age (1:4); God justifies them by faith in Christ (2:16); Christ redeemed humankind from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for them (3:13); God sent his Son to redeem those under the law, so that they might receive adoption as children (4:4-5), and God created anew in Christ (6:15).

Regarding the *effect* of the gospel, Paul especially highlights the spiritual liberation that the gospel achieves. This is due to the pressing situation that he must address in the letter: the believers in Galatia, who formerly had not known God and had been spiritually enslaved to gods that were not really gods (4:8), were converted when he preached the gospel to them, but were now turning to a new form of spiritual enslavement (the Jewish law). This is also the reason for the emphasis on spiritual liberty when he recounts his second visit to Jerusalem (see 2:4 and later also 5:1). Paul stresses that he opposed any form of spiritual enslavement; to budge on this would imply sacrificing “the truth of the gospel”.<sup>10</sup> For Paul, the truth of the gospel was thus at stake in Galatia.

The importance of the gospel in the ecclesiology in Galatians, and, in particular, the important role that the notion of the *truth* of the gospel plays in Paul’s ecclesiology in the letter is worth noting – especially when the question of congregational vitality in our time is raised.<sup>11</sup> Appropriating this notion for our time is not an easy task. Das (2014:105) correctly remarks:

In a pluralist, Western society, people do not, on the whole, subscribe to absolute truth claims. Even Western Christians shy away from expressing such claims. Paul contends that absolute truth can indeed be known because God has intervened in human affairs, yes, even in Paul’s letter itself, in order to reveal truth. To compromise that revelation is to compromise one’s commitment to the Revealer.

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9 See, among others, the discussions by Longenecker (1990:16); Witherington (1998:83); Moo (2013:80), and Soards & Pursiful (2015:22).

10 See also the prominence of this expression in 2:14, when he recounts the Antioch incident.

11 There is a variety of other important theological aspects regarding the notion of the truth of the gospel that can unfortunately not be discussed in more detail, in this instance. For example, Kammler (2014:128-129) stresses the indispensable role of the truth of the gospel in establishing the unity of the church, and Matjaž (2019:175-193) emphasises that fellowship in the congregation is based on recognising the truth of the gospel and points out its ecumenical and ethical implications.

#### 4. THE IMPORTANCE OF “THE HEARING OF FAITH”

The expression “the hearing of faith” occurs in 3:2. In this part of the letter, Paul uses a series of rhetorical questions to remind the Galatians of their experiences when they were converted to Christianity. This supports his case against the opponents, since at the stage when the Galatians were converted, they had not yet heard the alternative gospel; the opponents only started spreading it at a later stage. In 3:2, Paul asks the Galatians: “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?” One can interpret the expression “the hearing of faith” in various ways, as “hearing” can refer to the act of hearing or to the message which is heard. Furthermore, the genitive “of faith” can be interpreted as a subjective, objective, or exegetical genitive. This leaves one with five options for understanding “the hearing of faith”, namely hearing the faith (*i.e.* the message of faith); hearing with faith; a hearing of faith (*i.e.* a hearing coming from faith); the message about faith (*i.e.* the message having faith as its content), and the message of faith (*i.e.* the message resulting in faith). To my mind, the second or third option is preferable, since they focus on the Galatians’ experience when they became Christians, thus matching the logic underlying the previous and the next verses.<sup>12</sup> If this interpretation is correct, Paul reminds them that they received the Spirit because of their hearing with faith, *i.e.* their faithful hearing when he preached the gospel to them for the first time.

For the purpose of this study, I wish to draw attention to the significance of the term “faith” for one’s understanding of the ecclesiology of Galatians. 3:1-5 presupposes the contrast that Paul emphasises in 2:15-21 between justification by the works of the law and justification by faith in Christ. Paul’s opponents emphasised the importance of the law, since it was given to Israel when God established his covenant with them. Through faith in God and his Messiah Jesus, Gentiles were included in God’s covenant, and they thus had to practise the works of the law. Paul, however, regarded the circumcision requirement as an intention to subject the Galatians to the observance of the entire law and was adamant: God justified humankind through faith in Christ and not by the works of the law.<sup>13</sup> As Udo Schnelle puts it:

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12 For a more detailed discussion, see Tolmie (2005:105-106). For scholars making a similar choice, see McKnight (1995:140); Gundry (2011:34-35); Schreiner (2011:182-183), and Moo (2013:183).

13 In this study, I cannot venture into the extensive scholarly debates about the concepts “works of the law”, “justification”, and “faith in/or Christ”. For a good discussion of these issues, see Matera (2007:156-159) and Wilckens (2011:137-164).

For Paul, righteousness/justification in the strict sense is not a matter of doing but of being. God's act is prior to any human activity; the new being has the character not of a deed but of a gift (Schnelle 2009:268).

For grasping the ecclesiology of Galatians, the emphasis that Paul places on faith must be heeded. From this perspective, the church is a community of people who have faith in Christ. This notion does indeed play an important role in the way in which congregations view themselves in our time, but one often wonders if faith is not sometimes restricted to a mere rational consent or is dominated by an excessive self-focus on one's own situation and needs. For Paul, faith is much more. It is the exclusive designation for the relationship to God/Christ and the most conspicuous identity feature of the church. Furthermore, it entails a new interpretation and attitude to life, causing one to understand oneself, one's relationships and environment, as well as the whole cosmos in light of the Christ event. It is an experience of certainty, a strong basic trust that precedes every reflection, but at the same time determines and shapes one's thinking, feeling, and acting. It is thus a requalification of one's "I", based on and enabled by God's initiative in Christ. It is a gift of grace from God's side, and as such, it is a totally new type of experience opening up the possibility for humankind to accept God's actions and move into the realm of salvation (see, in more detail, Schnelle 2014:567-572).

## 5. THE ROLE OF RITUAL

In a contribution on identity and community in South African congregations, Schoeman (2015b:106) points out the importance of belonging (*i.e.* the bonding to a group) in congregations and notes how this emotional aspect of religion is linked to rituals and experience in congregations. This was also true of congregations in the New Testament era, and one gets two glimpses of this in Galatians:

In 3:27-28, one finds a reference to baptism. In this part of his argument, Paul reminds the Galatians of their experience of baptism, in order to convince them that they had become children of God by faith. Baptism was the central initiation rite in Early Christianity and the fact that Paul feels confident to use it as an argument against his opponents is a clear indication of the great impact it had on believers. In 3:27, he describes what happened to them as "baptism into Christ", implying that baptism transferred them "into" Christ in the sense that ownership of the believers was transferred to Christ whose name was proclaimed over them at baptism (Eckstein 2017:127-128). It should be noted, however, that Paul not only uses their recollection of this ritual as an argument against his



opponents, but he also develops the theological implications of the event, namely that they clothed themselves with Christ and that this implies that there was no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female, for they were all one in Christ (3:28). This statement constantly attracts the attention of scholars (see the overview in Tolmie 2023b:202-213) and the vision of a zero tolerance for any form of exclusivity in the church that Paul expresses so concisely, in this instance, has been appropriated for many different contexts in our time: African American congregations (Williams 2004); Chinese Biblical scholarship (Phua 2008:39-66); African society (Ukwuegbu 2008:305-318); East-Asian cultural identity (Kim 2009:141-173); minority Christian groups in Indonesia (Prior 2010:71-90); women's role in government in Africa (Oke 2012:167-178); post-Lutheran Sweden (Leander 2014:184-205); ethnicity in Africa (Togarasei 2016:101-114); sexism in churches in Zimbabwe (Machingura & Nyakuhwa 2015:92-113); diversity in South Africa (Slater 2016:1-9); patriarchalism in Swaziland (Curle 2017:57-97); the situation in Nigeria (Ottuh 2018), and congregations in the USA (Patterson 2020:188-190). All of this should serve as a reminder to congregations in South Africa that much still needs to be done in our own congregations and communities in this regard.

The second glimpse of the importance of ritual comes from 2:11-21, where Paul offers his version of the Antioch incident. According to him, the bone of contention was the practice of "eating together" between Jewish and non-Jewish Christians – seemingly a common event in Antioch. When Peter came to Antioch, he took part in such meals, until certain people from James turned up, after which he withdrew. The nature of the meals that were shared in Antioch is unclear; they might have been ordinary meals, (an early version of the) Lord's Supper, or both, but the fact that the Lord's Supper consisted of a complete meal makes a precise choice unnecessary. The crucial point is that the meals were a way of expressing the unity of the believers in Antioch (so, correctly, DeSilva 2018:357 and Von der Osten-Sacken 2019:110), and, according to Paul, Peter and those who followed his example had to be challenged theologically, as such behaviour did not correspond to the "truth of the gospel" (2:14). As Mayer-Haas (2001:123-148) correctly points out, two opposing models of intra-church unity were at stake, in this instance: a model based on covenant theology, presupposing the separation of Israel from other peoples, and a model based on the notion of a new universal fellowship brought about by Christ's death. Paul firmly believed in the latter. The point is that ritual in congregations embodies theology. The implications of this for the present time are evident: the theology underlying the practice of sacraments, rituals, customs, worship services, and the liturgy needs to be scrutinised thoroughly to determine the theology that is embodied by them. The criterion remains the same: Do they reflect the truth of the gospel?

## 6. THE GUIDANCE OF THE SPIRIT

The depiction of the Holy Spirit in Galatians attracts a great deal of attention from scholars, since Paul touches on so many facets of its working (see the overview in Tolmie 2023a:259-263). For the purposes of this article, only two issues that are important for understanding the ecclesiology of the letter are briefly discussed.

### 6.1 The role of the Spirit in experiencing childhood of God

Paul refers to this issue in 4:1-7, where he uses an analogy to guardianship to contrast spiritual slavery and sonship of God. He points out that humankind is spiritually enslaved by the elements of the world, but that God set them free by means of his Son, so that they could be adopted as his children (literally “sons”). Paul then continues: “Because you are his sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into (y)our<sup>14</sup> hearts, crying ‘Abba! Father!’”. Paul puts it beautifully: God set humankind free through his Son, so that humankind may become his *sons*, and the *Spirit of his Son* enables them to experience their sonship, by crying out “Father” in their hearts. This is theologically important.

The reference to the Spirit of God’s Son makes clear that it is not simply any Spirit to which Paul refers. It is the Spirit of the one who was crucified and raised, so that Christ’s own obedience and compassion determine the nature, the character, and the person of the Spirit given by God to those whom he adopts through the power of that same Spirit. And, as Jesus Christ enjoyed a filial relationship with God, now those adopted and filled with the Spirit of God’s Son are moved by the Spirit to cry out, ‘Abba, Father!’ (Soards & Pursiful 2015:198).

### 6.2 The role of the Spirit in Christian ethics

Paul’s continued emphasis on justification by faith and not by the works of the law could easily be misunderstood, as if believers could live whichever way they wish to. Such a notion is opposed very clearly in 5:13-14: God set believers spiritually free through Christ, but they may not abuse their spiritual freedom for self-indulgence. Instead, they should serve one another like slaves through love. The keyword is love, as it gives rise to a totally different type of ethics:

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14 The manuscript evidence is divided; either “our” or “your”, but “our” is the best reading. See Meiser (2022:183).

Whatever is done for love is done not by constraint but in freedom and joy. While, literally speaking, slavery is a form of oppression that crushes people and strips them of their dignity, serving as a Christian through love is a free commitment that lifts people up and confers great dignity upon them (Vanhoye & Williamson 2019:190).

Paul then immediately moves to the role of the Spirit in 5:16-26: Such an ethos can be achieved if believers are led by the Spirit, as they will then not commit the works of the flesh but will bear the fruit of the Spirit (with love again in the prime place among the fruit of the Spirit). Paul's view of ethics in Galatians may thus be summarised as spiritual liberty – love – ethos (see, in more detail, Tolmie 2006:241-256).

## 7. CONCLUSION

For Prof. Kobus Schoeman, the need to respond theologically to the question of what a congregation is all about in developing “an ecclesiology from below” has always been crucial. Key themes from his work – such as the insistence that a congregation's identity should always be understood in terms of its relationship to God, and the emphasis he places on group bonding, rituals, and experience – served as point of departure for this investigation of the way in which the ecclesiology of Galatians may be appropriated by current congregations on their journey to spiritual vitality. From this letter, five important insights were identified: God's calling as point of departure; the centrality of the gospel; the importance of “the hearing of faith”; the role of ritual, and the guidance of the Spirit. These should be appropriated in novel ways at present. It is important to realise that there is a great difference between “copying” and “appropriation”. “Copying” approaches Scripture as if it provides blueprints to be followed in our time. “Appropriation” implies that simply maintaining older views and practices is not enough; congregations should constantly engage with the qualities of the church that are dominant in Biblical ecclesiologies, endeavouring to appropriate them in more authentic ways in our time (see also Martin 2007:233).

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