

A Conflict Brews in Early Church Doctrine

By FR. WALTER M. ABBOTT, SJ.

Please read Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

Scholars have argued for decades whether this letter was written to people living in the north or the south of the area in central Asia Minor known as Galatia, and whether the letter was written before or after the council described in chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles.

I don't think that the first dispute makes any difference to most of you or that it should. I don't think that the second dispute really amounts to much. If the point of Paul's letter to the Galatians is to knock down the idea that circumcision and the Mosaic Law were as necessary to salvation as faith in Christ (and that is certainly the point), the letter must have been written before the Jerusalem Council, which settled the question.

I think those are right who say it is scarcely conceivable that the controversy over circumcision could have broken out anew after the Jerusalem Council.

If we are on the right track in this matter, what we have in

the letter to the Galatians is Paul's earlier handling of a problem that would eventually be handled in a definitive way by "the apostles and the elders," saying that "the Holy Spirit and we have agreed" (Acts 15:28).

I hope you will not think that Galatians 2:1-10 is Paul's version of the Jerusalem Council. Some have tried to hold that idea, but in 2:2 Paul says he is describing a private meeting with the Christian leaders at Jerusalem, not a meeting such as the council was. The decision reached was substantially the same, but I think we should say that the council later fully endorsed the policy which Paul and the leaders had earlier agreed upon.

I have used the expression "knock down" in referring to Paul's handling of the problem. If you will look at verses 8 and 9 in chapter 1, where twice in one breath Paul tells someone to go to hell, I think you will agree that my expression was not too strong.

Paul starts this letter as an angry man. His authority has been challenged — he heatedly reasserts it. At the beginning of chapter 3 he shows his temper again, but notice how gen-

tle and even affectionate he has become by chapter 4. I think you will agree that the rest of the letter is quite irenic.

What Paul got angry about was, of course, a matter of considerable importance. He was confronted with the fact that some of his Christian converts were accepting a development in doctrine that he could not approve: the doctrine that circumcision and the Mosaic Law were as necessary to salvation as faith in Christ. This development meant that Christ's redeeming death on the Cross and the Christian's faith in Christ given to him by God were not sufficient to justify or "put a man right" with God. In his letter Paul sets forth the understanding Christians should have about the Mosaic Law and about Christ.

The "false brethren" who preached "another gospel" were claiming that circumcision was the way in which gentiles (non-

Jewish by birth) could belong to Abraham's "seed" and participate in the Old Testament promises associated with Christ's return. Apparently they were promoting what we might call today a combination of Judaism and Christianity.

As Paul goes to work in this letter to untangle the other preachers' use of the Old Testament we see him developing a basic form for his future preaching and teaching as we have it recorded in the New Testament.

One of the immediate results, given to us in this very letter, is the remarkable development of doctrine about the Christian's participation in the life of Christ, a teaching which we shall see ever developing in Paul's subsequent epistles.

Here in the letter to the Galatians Paul writes, "I have been put to death with Christ on his Cross, so that it is no longer I who live, but it is

Christ who lives in me. This life that I live now, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave his life for me" (2:19-20).

Paul means, as he will abundantly make clear in later letters, that through faith and baptism a Christian puts on Christ and is united to his death. Therefore Paul and other Jews who become Christians die to the Mosaic Law. They are freed from the bondage which, Paul explains, that law actually was. Now they live with the life of God which the law had not been able to give them. Paul goes so far as to say that the only true sons of Abraham are those who imitate the faith of Abraham, and faith brings Christians closer to Abraham than Jews who are born as Jews. The baptized Christians, Paul says, have "the qualities of Christ himself" (3:27), and have become no longer slaves but sons of God. "Freedom is what we have — Christ has set us free!"

When God Gets Under the Skin

By FR. CARL J. PFEIFER, SJ.

For three years I worked with delinquent boys in a state correctional institution. It was a challenging and rewarding experience. I remember some of the boys. Most of them had been sentenced for car theft or robbery. They had a facade of hardness. They were going to prove that they didn't care, that no one could touch them, because they were tough. Actually they were almost untouchable, not because of toughness, but because they grew up in a world in which they had never experienced trust or genuine care from any adult.

They believed deep down that they were worthless, that nobody could possibly care how they looked or how they felt.

What was striking was the gradual change that came over some of these lonely boys. After a few months it was not unusual to see signs of better grooming or a more confident manner of walking. Even an unforced smile, an honest laugh, might warm the otherwise carefully maintained "cool". Some showed signs of motivation in learning a trade or how to read. Relaxed, comfortable conversation slowly replaced the stereotyped language of the "hood."

In each case where this kind of humanizing growth was noticed the cause was readily discernible. The boy had cautiously opened his defensive shell a little as he allowed himself to experience a relationship of trust with one of the members of the staff. To be trusted, to feel that someone actually did care, released healing, vital powers that had been locked up within the youth for years. One of the boys said to me after an hour of just sitting quietly together with hardly a word of conversation, "Why the hell did you spend an hour with a bum like me?"

The question needed no complicated answer. It was because I thought he was worth it; that I cared enough about him to spend an hour of time just being with him. It made a difference.

Whoever has had an experience of being loved and respected understands this freeing, fulfilling, sense of personal worth.

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understand the meaning of God's grace than reflection on the experience of being loved. The Scriptures are filled with passages that do just that, compare God's favor to the surprising and gratuitous personal attachment we call love. "If God set his heart on you and chose you . . . it was for love of you" (Dt 7:7). "Before the world was made, He chose us, chose us in Christ . . . to live through love in His presence" (Eph 1:4). This is the first and deepest meaning of grace: the favor of God for someone that is so deep and so surprising that He actually gives Himself in love to that person.

This self-giving of God to those he loves involves sharing of life, an intimate union of love that the Scriptures compare frequently to the complete union of man and wife in marriage.

Unfortunately this meaning of grace — called in theological tradition "uncreated grace" or the "divine indwelling" — was not stressed in religious education during the past several centuries. Recent developments in the theology of Grace return to the biblical and traditional focus on Grace as God's free giving of Himself in a bond of love. Again, development of doctrine is grounded in a return to the most traditional sources.

St. Augustine in the fifth century expressed beautifully the traditional insight into God's Grace: "We are loveable. O God, because you have loved us." Grace is first and foremost God's gracious love for each of us, undeserved, unmerited, completely free. Secondly it is the change in us that occurs because of this love. A remarkable passage in Ezekiel (Chapter 16) portrays dramatically what Augustine summed up concisely. God is described as noticing a baby girl, Israel, lying newly born in the desert sands, abandoned and unloved. God is moved with affection and cares for her. He loves her, and in so doing gives her a beauty that captivates everyone. He unites her to Himself in a bond of marriage. "Live and grow," He says, and she grows more and more beautiful because of His love.

In language we are familiar with, "sanctifying graces," "created grace," is this change in us created and sustained by God's love. Sanctifying grace is

a theological term that describes the marvellous change that takes place in us if we allow God's love to touch our hearts. "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Cor 15:10). Theologians of past ages spoke of this as healing and elevating grace.

Grace, then, is not a thing, a quantity of something that can be mysteriously increased by receiving the Sacraments or saying certain prayers. Grace is fundamentally a relationship of love, God's love which enables us to love Him in return and to grow in a richer, fuller human life of love.

Relationships can be deepened by dialogue, by sensitive service, by being present to one another. Relationships can also be neglected, or ruptured. The graced relationship between man and God can be allowed to grow; it can also be allowed to stagnate. From God's side the love is unfailing: "I have loved you with an everlasting love, so I am constant in my affection for you" (Jer 31:3). Our relationship with God depends for its growth on our opening ourselves to His love. "Look, I am standing at the door knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share his meal, side by side with him (Rev 3:20).

Understood in this way the doctrine of grace can be recognized as God's love reaching out to us in all the life-giving moments of human experience. His gracious presence can touch us through the kiss of a loved one as well as through the Sacramental signs. Our openness to that love is not exercised solely in receiving the Sacraments, but in every effort to be open to life and people.

Openness to life, to people, allows God to enter into our whole being and slowly form us in His image. Sometimes the change is readily noticeable, as in the case of delinquents who experience genuine respect and trust, as in the experience of being loved by husband or wife. These more dramatic changes help us, in the light of faith, recognize what is always and everywhere the deepest dimension of our lives. "We are loveable, O God, because you love us."

KNOW YOUR FAITH

Q. and A.

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

Q. How are bishops chosen?

A. The manner of choosing bishops in the United States was established in 1916. The system works as follows:

1. At the beginning of Lent, every odd-numbered year, all bishops indicate to the Archbishop of the area the names of one or two priests whom they judge fit for the office of bishop.
2. Before deciding on these names, the bishops are urged to seek the advice of the diocesan consultors and certain pastors.
3. After receiving from the bishops the names of the candidates, the Archbishop adds his own. He then draws up the list in alphabetical order and sends it to the various bishops in his province in order that they might familiarize themselves with the nominees.
4. After Easter the Archbishop calls a meeting of the bishops in such a manner that it does not attract public attention.
5. An oath of secrecy is given at this meeting and the discussion follows "in a moderate tone." A vote is taken on each candidate and the tally is recorded. In case of a tie, the bishops may indicate the name of the candidate preferred above the rest.
6. A copy of all the proceedings is sent to the Congregation of Bishops in Rome by way of the Apostolic Delegate.
7. Bishops are always free to write to the Congregation on the occasion of a vacancy to express their mind about the qualifications of a candidate.
8. The Holy Father makes the final appointment.

A second method of selection is that episcopal conferences will be invited to select nominees on a yearly basis according to norms established by the Holy See and to send the names to the Holy See.

A third method of selection involves the Apostolic Delegate. Some of the provisions are as follows:

1. The Apostolic Delegate institutes the informative canonical process for all candidates and forwards the names to Rome.
2. After receiving such information himself, the Apostolic Delegate makes his own coram domino ("before the Lord") choice.
3. The Apostolic Delegate must respect the competencies of the National Episcopal Conference and should also avail himself freely and discreetly of the advice of priests and prudent laymen who seem most likely to provide sincere and useful information.

I have said nothing, of course, about the many human factors (i.e., "politicizing") involved in the promotion of various priests to the episcopate.

Studies are now underway, with the sponsorship of the Canon Law Society of America, to widen the participation of clergy and laity in this selection process.