



# THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME 32

NEW SERIES 2015

ISSN 1937-8386

The Princeton Seminary Bulletin is published annually  
by Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

## CONTENTS

---

### COMMENCEMENT: FAREWELL TO THE GRADUATES

The Reverends Eldad and Medad

*M. Craig Barnes*

### FALL OPENING COMMUNION

The Power of a Word

*M. Craig Barnes*

### SPRING OPENING COMMUNION

Losing the Dream of Nazareth

*Sonia E. Waters*

## LECTURES

Resurrection and Bodies

*Dale C. Allison Jr.*

Performing Prosperity, Promoting Pride!

*Jonathan L. Walton*

Homiletical Implications of Barth's Doctrine of Election

*William H. Willimon*

Overcoming Justice Fatigue

*Teresa Fry Brown*

The Point of Exegesis is Exegeting Life

*Luke Timothy Johnson*

Love in Everything: A Brief Primer to Julian of Norwich

*Amy Laura Hall*

The Task of the Korean Church for Peace in the Time of Globalization:  
Seeking Ecumenical Social Ethics in the Context of Northeast Asia

*Sungbihn Yim*

Knowing in the Dark: Sin, Race, and the Quest for Salvation

*Sarah Coakley*



# THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

VOLUME 32

NEW SERIES 2015

ISSN 1937-8386

The Princeton Seminary Bulletin is published annually  
by Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

## CONTENTS

---

### COMMENCEMENT: FAREWELL TO THE GRADUATES

The Reverends Eldad and Medad *M. Craig Barnes* 1

### FALL OPENING COMMUNION

The Power of a Word *M. Craig Barnes* 4

### SPRING OPENING COMMUNION

Losing the Dream of Nazareth *Sonia E. Waters* 7

### LECTURES

Resurrection and Bodies *Dale C. Allison Jr.* 11

Performing Prosperity, Promoting Pride! *Jonathan L. Walton* 36

Homiletical Implications of Barth's Doctrine of Election *William H. Willimon* 47

Overcoming Justice Fatigue *Teresa Fry Brown* 59

The Point of Exegesis is Exegeting Life *Luke Timothy Johnson* 72

Love in Everything: A Brief Primer to Julian of Norwich *Amy Laura Hall* 83

The Task of the Korean Church for Peace in the Time of Globalization:  
Seeking Ecumenical Social Ethics in the Context of Northeast Asia *Sungbihn Yim* 96

Knowing in the Dark: Sin, Race, and the Quest for Salvation *Sarah Coakley* 108

## The Point of Exegesis is Exegeting Life

*Luke Timothy Johnson*

*Dr. Luke Timothy Johnson is R. W. Woodruff Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at Candler School of Theology at Emory University. He delivered the Alexander Thompson Lecture on February 10, 2015.*

In the middle of a highly technical debate with Dionysius—about the relation of the soul to human blood—Origen of Alexandria suddenly interrupts himself to address the audience. Quoting Romans 12:1, he says, “I beseech you therefore, be transformed,” adding, “resolve to learn so that you can be transformed....” And he concludes, “What is it I really want? To treat the matter in a way that heals the souls of my listeners” (*Dial* 13.25–15.25). These statements perfectly summarize the attitude of Christianity’s first and arguably greatest biblical scholar and theologian.

As head of the Catechetical School in Alexandria, Origen brought superb critical gifts to his study of Scripture. He established the basis for a critical text of the Old Testament and dealt with the inconsistencies and contradictions in both the Old and New Testament with intellectual integrity. In his *First Principles*, he virtually invented systematic theology, with a vision of God’s universal will to save so bold that it has never been equaled. Origen had a remarkable openness to the truth wherever it might appear, declaring,

If the doctrine be sound and the effect of it good, whether it was made known to the Greeks by Plato or any of the wise men of Greece, or whether it was delivered to the Jews by Moses or any of the prophets, or whether it was given to the Christians in the recorded teaching of Jesus Christ, or in the instructions of his apostles, that does not affect the value of the truth communicated (*Celsus* 7.59).

Origen’s freedom and boldness was that of a man whose heart was firmly fixed in the truth of the tradition to which he had committed himself from youth and for which he would suffer persecution and die as a confessor. He opposed the Gnostics vigorously and in his response to Celsus showed himself the greatest of all Christian apologists. He asserted the traditional canon of Scripture against movements to expand or contract it. His theological imagination worked within an explicit and profound commitment to the rule of faith. He was, in short, a scholar and theologian of the church. He gives expression to this commitment in two asides in his homilies:

I want to be a man of the church. I do not want to be called by the name of the founder of some heresy, but by the name of Christ, and to bear that name which is blessed on earth. It is my desire, indeed as in spirit, both to be and to be called a Christian (*Luke* 16.6).

And again,

I bear the title of a priest, and as you see, I preach the word of God. But if I do anything contrary to the discipline of the church or the rule laid down in the gospels—if I give offense to you and to the church—then I hope that the whole church will unite with one consent and cast me off (*Josh* 7.6).

Despite his great learning and his impressive critical skills, Origen had but one goal in his interpretation of Scripture, which for him was also the interpretation of the mystery of Christ, and that was the transformation of his hearers according to the Mind of Christ.

## The State of Biblical Scholarship Today

I have opened my presentation with these remarks about Origen because he is a model for biblical scholars in every age in the way he combines the free exercise of critical intelligence, a grounding in the church, and the desire to interpret so as to transform his readers. His example has never been easy to follow, for few have ever had equivalent energy, genius, and passion. But his example appears to be especially difficult to follow in our generation. It is rare to find a biblical scholar who is also a theologian or apologist for the faith; it is equally rare to find a theologian who is adept at biblical interpretation, or a preacher who has either a scriptural or theological imagination. For biblical scholars, indeed, it seems almost as though the further removed they are from the taint of theology, the more prestige they enjoy as scholars. The ways of thinking that Origen so easily and lightly held together, we experience as separate realms that only occasionally and with great difficulty communicate.

The reasons for our present dismemberment are complex and not all recent. They include the shift within theology that privileged *scientia* more than *sapientia*, the subsequent division of theological sciences into separate specialties—"I'm not a theologian, I'm a biblical scholar"—and finally, the sociological shift from the church to the university as the prime locus for critical biblical interpretation. The church—and when I use the term I mean the church ecumenical—has become ever more dependent on the centers of advanced biblical scholarship in great universities at a point when those universities are becoming ever more aggressively secular in their outlook. A biblical scholar does not get tenure in the university because of piety or pastoral concern; in fact, just the opposite is the case: the freer one's scholarship is from the concerns of faith the more certainly it will be rewarded. Departments of religious studies in universities barely tolerate the subdiscipline called theology, and the study of the Bible is increasingly influenced by forms of ideological criticism that not only reduce it to a set of merely human compositions, but compositions so corrupted by oppressive ideologies that they do more harm than good to readers for whom appropriate ideological therapy is unavailable.

Seminaries and Schools of Theology ought to represent an exception to the rule, but in fact, they demonstrate it. Especially seminaries dedicated to genuine learning find it more difficult to recruit the best and brightest of biblical professors who have not been deeply, sometimes fatally, infected by the perspectives and approaches dominating the university and biblical guilds, which also form the standards by which they are evaluated by professional peers. Young professors of Bible also tend to have more loyalty to guild standards than to the desire of colleagues that they relax their critical guard a bit and join in a theological conversation. As a result, biblical faculty usually form the segment of seminary faculties most resistant to such conversation, and students often find the manner in which the Bible is taught not so much an open avenue to theological thinking as a roadblock. The gatekeepers, it often seems, want to let people in but not let them out again.

One partner is rarely totally responsible for a divorce, and the church has not been without fault in shaping the present situation as one in which the academy increasingly loses its heart and the church increasingly loses its mind. The church's long-standing reluctance to take the critical study of the Bible seriously, and its increasing tendency to reject virtually all forms of critical inquiry as threats rather than gifts to the tradition, also play a role in splitting those elements that Origen and other patristic authors held together. Across the church ecumenical there is far less concern expressed for the ignorance or dullness of ministerial candidates than for their loyalty and piety. The church, it would seem, does not much need high intelligence or serious education, except in those areas where ecclesiastical advancement is involved. Biblical scholars and theologians who claim (and actually seek) to represent both a commitment to the highest standards of critical inquiry and a devotion to the tradition and teaching authority of the church find themselves in a small and increasingly vulnerable space, liable to be dismissed by fellow scholars as insufficiently critical and distrusted by fellow believers as insufficiently faithful.

Those of us who are, or want to be, faithful and imaginative theologians and interpreters of Scripture within the church cannot by ourselves close social and ideological gaps that are now centuries in the forming. Biblical scholars can, however, take some positive steps while not in the least stepping outside the bounds of their discipline, by widening their understanding of the range and goal of exegesis. The point of exegesis, my title suggests, is exegeting life. In the remainder of this presentation, I want to develop that simple declaration with specific reference to the New Testament.

### Toward a More Adequate Exegesis

I begin by baldly stating and defining the premises for the thesis I seek to demonstrate. The main lines of my argument will be by way of a specific textual example. First, then, the bald assertion: if we approach the New Testament compositions as they

approach us, there are four distinct yet interrelated dimensions of the compositions that invite analysis: the anthropological, the historical, the literary, and the religious. Here's what I mean by the terms. Anthropological means not simply that the writings were composed by humans—inspiration is an ascription of authority not a theory of composition—but by humans who were seeking to interpret their lives in light of powerful experiences; historical means that these humans lived and wrote within cultures of the past only partially available to us; literary means that their interpretations of life were found in the shape of the compositions they wrote, and the conventions of ancient rhetoric are distinct from our own; religious means that the experiences and convictions forcing the reinterpretation of their symbolic world were those involving what they perceived as ultimate power.

The failure to engage any one of these dimensions means a diminishment of our ability to understand these ancient writings, and more significant, the ways in which they can speak to our lives today. The writings of the New Testament are historically conditioned, and the distance between their authors and present readers in terms of language, social circumstances, and specific circumstances must be assessed and (however partially) bridged. The exegete cannot pretend Paul wrote in English or that the Corinthians lived as do the Californians. They are written in literary and rhetorical forms quite distinct from those to which we are accustomed, and to the degree that meaning derives from form, their literary and rhetorical shaping is essential for responsible reading. The exegete cannot proceed as though the Gospel narratives were historical reportage lacking in literary sophistication, or Paul's letters simple outpourings of emotion without rhetorical crafting.

It is equally important, however, to recognize that the New Testament compositions emerged from the real-life experiences of the first believers, who were, like their fellows, shaped by the cultural matrices of Greco-Roman and especially Jewish symbolic worlds and were required, like people everywhere, to try to make sense of their experiences, positive and negative, within the social structures, processes, and metaphors, that constitute a symbolic world. The exegete can ignore neither the kinds of experiences that supported and challenged the social reality we call the symbolic world, nor the specific shape of the symbols that give shape to experience and are in turn reshaped by experiences sufficiently powerful to challenge them.

Finally, the exegete must take into account the specific character of the religious experiences that gave birth to and continued to enliven the movement out of which the New Testament was written. Certainly, experiences of power associated with prophecy and tongues, healings and visions, form part of this religious register. But of supreme importance is the most radical of all religious claims, that a human being executed as a criminal by Roman authority and designated as lone cursed by God by Torah, was raised from the dead and exalted to Lordship and cosmic dominion. The exegete cannot bracket

the most important cause of the New Testament's coming into existence or the claim that alone makes sense of its distinctive shaping. Neither, I think, can the exegete of these ancient texts completely bracket the fact that these experiences and claims continue to occur among those for whom these writings are not of academic but existential concern.

Now of these four dimensions, two emphasize the distance between us and the writers of the New Testament, namely the historical and literary, and two allow a degree of intimacy between readers and those who wrote these texts, namely the anthropological and religious. Whereas the historical and literary can be learned only through knowledge of the past, the anthropological and religious can be known through appropriate contemporary analogies. The ways in which humans arrange and measure and assign status among themselves today does not differ absolutely but only relatively from the ways of the past (honor and shame are scarcely absent from contemporary life). The ways in which people experience the divine are likewise limited in their variety and capable of being understood across cultural differences.

It is safe to say, I think, that biblical interpretation at least since the enlightenment has almost exclusively cultivated the historical and literary dimensions of the New Testament, and with rare and less than satisfying exceptions, has almost completely neglected the anthropological and religious dimensions. As a result, the closer the ancient text is studied, the more it recedes into the past: its historical circumstances are singular, its rhetoric is time-conditioned. We may understand these dimensions of the composition, but the paradoxical and unintended result is that the composition remains alien to our own experience and convictions. There is little if any possibility for the exegesis of the text also to be an exegesis of our life or for the exegesis of present-day life to make the ancient text more intelligible.

There is, however, some reason to hope that if we can employ the same sort of critical intelligence and imagination with the other two dimensions of the New Testament compositions, they may appear, even to us, to have something to say not only to people long ago but also to us today, and biblical exegetes may be perceived by others as having something valuable to say for the transformation of life. In that hope I offer for your consideration a specific instance.

### Reading Galatians Historically

Paul's letter to the Galatians is among the New Testament writings most intensely scrutinized by scholars. As a historical source, it is both richly evocative and maddeningly elusive. On one side, it is a prime source for Paul's biography, providing his invaluable first-hand account of his early life, call, early ministry, as well as his meetings with the Jerusalem leadership and his conflict with Peter in Jerusalem; all pure gold to the historian, especially since this data can be put into critical conversation with the account in Acts. On the other side, its own historical setting remains so obscure that the letter

cannot with confidence be located within Paul's ministry: the location of "the churches through Galatia," the time of Paul's first visit to them, and even the time of his writing, have been debated endlessly but without firm conclusion.

The historian's attention has been given primarily, however, to the conflict within the Galatian churches that Paul addresses. The letter yields some definite evidence: Paul founded the community among Gentiles and was now away from them. In his absence, certain agitators argued for the need to be circumcised and observe the Jewish law. In his letter Paul opposes that initiative and suggests banning those who advance it. If this much is clear, much else in the letter is not, which makes Galatians a well-trodden and frustrating arena for historical debate. The difficulties center on two interrelated questions: who exactly were Paul's opponents, and why does he say the things he does about them? When Paul speaks not only of someone advancing "another gospel," but of "bewitching" them and "disturbing them," and not only of advocating circumcision but also the keeping of "new moons and festivals" and the worship of or with "the elemental powers of the universe," how much should we attribute to Paul's polemical posture and how much can we take as accurate indicators of the opponents' views?

Lacking firm external controls, a certain amount of circularity is inevitably involved in reconstructing Paul's "opponents." Arguing from an assumed analogy between them and those "false brethren" who insinuated themselves in Jerusalem to spy out Paul's freedom, scholars have usually taken the Galatian opponents to be outside agitators. An early and highly influential theory was that offered by F. C. Baur, who read Galatians as the centerpiece of the ideological battle in early Christianity between the Paul party, who held for the freedom of the Gospel in faith, and the Peter party, who under the leadership of James of Jerusalem, sought to "Judaize" Christianity by a return to law observance. Baur offered a unified field theory of Pauline opposition in which the opponents of all the letters (1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Colossians, Philippians) offered variations of the basically two-ideology conflict that led eventually to the historical resolution called early Catholicism. Not all have been convinced that the opponents were even Christian, and a variety of hypotheses have been advanced concerning possible Jewish opposition: Pharisees infiltrating diaspora synagogues, wandering Hellenistic Jewish missionaries, even Essenes.

The recovery of classical rhetoric in recent decades offers another approach to historical analysis. Impressed by what they take to be Paul's defensiveness in this letter—as when he insists he has been appointed by God rather than humans—they see Paul's impassioned language about himself and the agitators as a response to attacks made on his apostolic credentials by these same opponents. The influence of Paul's polemic against the super apostles in 2 Corinthians 10–11 is obvious. The monument to this way of reading is found in H. D. Betz's commentary on Galatians in the *Hermeneia* series, which interprets the letter as a form of forensic rhetoric and puts Paul's apostolic self-defense



(which is also a defense of the “truth of the gospel”) as the central issue. The possibility that there are no outside opponents but only ambitious insiders in the Galatian churches, or that the problem might be not the lack of Paul’s apostolic credentials but precisely his status as a Jew, has not captured the minds of many interpreters, but I will return to that possibility in a moment.

Here I want only to make the summary point that the effect of all this historical and rhetorical labor has been to keep Galatians more definitively in the past and less pertinent to the lives of present-day readers, for whom circumcision and keeping the law are not religious options, who struggle with Jew/Gentile identity not at all, and whose Gentile roots are long forgotten.

But I must also observe that such distancing was not at all the original intention of the historical-critical approach when, shaped by the fusion of British and German Lutheran theological commitments, it first flourished at the University of Tübingen in the mid-19th century. F. C. Baur and his colleagues saw the historian’s task as performing a theological role of immediate pertinence to Protestant Christianity. The battle between Paul and the Judaizers was still read as it was by Martin Luther as the template for the struggle between the legalism and sacramentalism of Roman Catholicism. The conflict then was seen as one between two distinct religious systems, one based on works, the other based on faith. The historian’s theological task was to recover the essence of a Christianity based on faith alone—to be found in the authentic Paul—in distinction from the encroachments of Jewish legalism that infiltrated the gospel already among Paul’s opponents. The value of isolating Paul’s opponents as foreign agents threatening the truth of the gospel was obvious: Galatians stood as the charter of Christian freedom, a constant warning to Protestants to resist the enticements of Judaeo-Catholicism.

Such a theological impetus to historical reconstruction has never made much sense for Catholic scholars, and is also long-gone among the majority of today’s biblical scholars whose interest in history is far less in service of the recovery of authentic Christianity than it is in service of pure research, or perhaps some ideological critique of precisely that form of Christianity championed by the reformers. Among such scholars— and those they teach—Galatians remains fixed in the past, with little to say for the transformation of the mind among present-day readers.

### Reading Galatians Religiously

What light might be thrown on Galatians—and on our lives today—if we try to read Paul’s letter as a witness to actual human experience? We can begin by noting the complete absence of indicators that there are outsiders in the community at all; this is a conversation between Paul and those he converted. We can note next that the letter tells us three certain things about Paul’s readers: they were Gentiles, they experienced the power of the Holy Spirit when they heard with faith, and they were baptized into

Christ. Two further things are strongly suggested: some of these Gentiles not only sought circumcision but sought to exclude those who did not. About Paul, we know that he started as a Jew zealous for the law, encountered the risen Lord, and became his apostle. Knowing these things, we must ask the most obvious and pressing question: why would the Galatians want to undergo the painful ritual of circumcision and seek to take on the burden of observing Torah?

We find the beginning of an answer in the simple observation that humans are naturally competitive, natural seekers after status, and eager to achieve those levels of status that require great effort and even ordeals precisely as a way of marking them as superior to others. A second simple exegesis of life yields that religion is not in the least a domain free from such human competitiveness. It may, in fact, reveal the competitive impulse precisely in the drive toward perfection. These person-on-the-street insights—and what is social science but common sense and close observation given a technical vocabulary?—are supported by cross-cultural anthropological studies of what might be called “ritual imprinting and the politics of perfection.” Virtually without exception, religions, as all human associations, require not single but multiple initiations in order to become fully mature members.

Certainly, those in Galatia coming into the cult of Messiah Jesus from a background in the Greco-Roman mysteries would have expected to be initiated multiple times. Initiation into the most ancient Mystery at Eleusis required multiple stages before full membership; initiation into the cult of the goddess Isis led naturally to a second initiation into the cult of her consort Osiris. Such initiation moved devotees from one status level to another. The perilous passage, as Victor Turner has noted, was one in which initiands experienced a state of *communitas* (fellowship, equality, sharing), but this state of liminality was always temporary. The point was moving from a lesser to a greater level. Initiation involves an ordeal of passage, the gaining of new knowledge, but above all, status elevation. Certainly, Gentile converts to the Jesus cult in Galatia would have expected initiations beyond the simple ritual of baptism that marked their entrance: where could they go from there?

The obvious answer was initiation into the children of Israel, the cult of Moses, through the ordeal of circumcision. And the obvious Mystagogue was Paul. The most likely source for the Galatians' knowledge of Judaism was the man who continued to call himself “more advanced than any in his generation” in observance of the Law. It was not Paul's lack of credentials as an apostle of Christ that would bother them; it was the fact that he was not willing to share his status as a Jew. They wanted to go where he was. Not least among the attractions of this second initiation was that it was available only to some: males could achieve this higher form of perfection and females could not. What use is perfection if it is available to all? Galatians whose ritual imprinting was that of the ancient mysteries would have been eager to hear, from Paul, from outside agitators, from

ambitious insiders who had drawn the obvious inferences from Paul's Jewish status, of the opportunity to advance themselves in this new cult. When Paul asks them rhetorically, "Having begun in the spirit are you reaching cultic perfection in the flesh?" their answer would be, "well, yes, didn't you?"

Reading from an anthropological and religious perspective, the true human drama of this ancient composition comes alive. We begin to appreciate, for example, Paul's extreme frustration, for the Galatians want to move from the experience of Christ to the very spot from which Paul himself has been moved by his experience of Christ! We can see Paul's long opening narrative in this light not as a stage of self-defense, but as the presentation of his own experience as exemplary: his adherence to the law led to the persecution of the church, but once he had experienced God's Son, he held on to that experience even in the face of those who sought to impose circumcision or enforce Jewish rules for table-fellowship.

We see the importance of Paul's emphasis on the Galatians' own religious experience: when they heard the message of Christ crucified in faith, they received the Holy Spirit and powerful things were done among them. This appeal to their experience of divine power is the premise for the entire argument that follows. We see then in Paul's elaborate midrashic argument in chapters 3 and 4 the essential point: the law is not the ultimate form of perfection but only a temporary and inferior form of instruction; the ultimate status is becoming children of God through the promise of the Holy Spirit made to Abraham and brought to them in the Son whom God sent into the world to make them adopted children.

We see that all of this leads to Paul's insistence in 5:1–6 that those seeking circumcision are not moving forward, but cutting themselves off from the gift they had received. Wanting more, they are in danger of losing what they have been given. Maturity is not a matter of ritual initiations, but of growth in the life already given them: "In Christ is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, but faith working through love" (5:6). We understand as well why only here Paul uses the phrase "no longer male and female" in his statement of the *koinonia* in Christ brought about by baptism (4:29), for he knows the implications for higher status available to males through the initiation of circumcision.

We see that the true *telos* of Paul's letter to the Galatians is not his discussion of faith and works in chapters 3–4, as though the issue were soteriological, but his argument concerning life in the Spirit in chapters 5–6, for the real issue is ecclesiological. Paul therefore opposes the works of the flesh, which are driven by envy, rivalry, and party spirit, and tear a community apart, and the fruits of the spirit, which manifest the dispositions consonant with faith working through love. If you live by the Spirit, he tells them, you should walk by the spirit. This means that their genuine maturity or perfection comes from their living out the model of *pistis* and *agape* demonstrated by "the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins" (1:4). Paul declares of himself, "I no longer live

myself. The one living in me is Christ. That which I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith that belongs to the son of God, the one who loved me and handed himself over for me" (2:20). This same pattern of self-giving love is to be theirs: "bear on another's burdens," he tells them, "and in that way bring to full completion the pattern of the Messiah (the law of Christ)" (6:2).

Finally, we can appreciate what an uphill battle Paul was fighting. He wanted them to stay in the liminal condition given them by baptism, in which they were all one in Christ, with the status markers of ethnicity, gender, or social standing relativized by the greater gift of the Spirit that they all shared (3:28–29). They wanted to gain the status that they thought Paul had in the politics of perfection. He was in labor pains until "Christ be formed among [them]" (4:19), they wanted precisely the physical identity marker that would enable them to "make a good showing in the flesh" (6:11). He wishes for them the freedom that comes from the Holy Spirit (5:1); they prefer the slavery that comes from the same old ways of status measurement (5:13). Paul's argument that in the Holy Spirit they gained a share in Jesus' status as God's Son and that living this out was the measure of maturity was theologically profound. But he was fighting the deep human instinct for competition, and the religious logic of ritual imprinting.

And, as we know, Paul did not ultimately carry the day. Gentile Christians were willing to abandon circumcision. But the logic of multiple initiations led shortly to the development of confirmation, and then ordination, which itself eventually distributed itself into minor and major clerical orders, as well as the status markers of monsignor, bishop, cardinal, and pope. Ultimately, the truly ambitious Christian had available almost as many stages of initiation (and therefore status enhancement) as the devotees of Mithras.

## Conclusion

Can such a reading of Galatians that engages its anthropological and religious dimensions lead us at least a step closer to the sort of "reading for transformation" that marked the great Origen of Alexandria? First, it allows us to be addressed directly and freshly by Paul's words. We also have been baptized in the one Spirit. But we are no freer than were the ancient Galatians from the bred-in-the-bone rivalry and competitiveness that can express itself religiously in any number of ways. Essential to the process of transformation in Christ is to see the ways in which we individually and communally fail to live out the spirit of love that fulfills the law of Christ. It does not require a particularly discerning eye, for example, to see that the church today has a clerical authority structure that privileges men and excludes women. This is an obvious and glaring way in which we continue to resist the implications of Paul's challenge to live in a "new creation," where neither circumcision nor non-circumcision count (6:15).

But the whole point of exegeting Scripture to exegete life is that we do not remain

content with such crude, if accurate, institutional indictments. Paul's letter addresses each of us in our anthropological and religious lives, and invites us to examine the ways in which beginning in the Spirit, we may be seeking perfection in the flesh, the ways in which we may be making our own life-projects—however worthy in themselves—idolatrous, “serving things that are not gods” but “weak and beggarly elements of the world” (4:8–9) and by so doing are weakening the community that lives by the faith of Christ. Each of us needs to ask about the ways in which our competitive instinct, even within the religious life, works to weaken and destroy rather than build up the community.

Paul's letter does not only challenge us, it also encourages us in the exegesis of life. We are invited to think about our life-story, as Paul did his, as a narrative with a capacity to witness to God's power. We are encouraged to celebrate and also defend the freedom to which we have been called in Christ, and refuse to submit again to any slavery, not that of sin, nor that of any human tyranny. We are empowered to discern the power of the Holy Spirit at work among us with powerful deeds, and celebrate the gift of initiation into the Lord Jesus who has made all of us the new humanity of a new creation in which human status does not matter and in which human difference serves not to separate but rather to make possible a mutual sharing of gifts. And among the works of the Spirit among us, we are encouraged to discern above all the ways in which the faith of Jesus Christ continues to find expression in the lives of those among us who bear the burdens of others, and, as saints in every age demonstrate the truth of the resurrection.

Who knows? Perhaps even those of us overloaded with degrees and burdened with dubious knowledge may learn how to read our lives with the same energy and integrity that we like to believe we bring to the exegesis of ancient texts, and might ourselves be surprised at the way reading for transformation actually transforms.