

# Under Pressure

*Text: Galatians 4: 8-20* ESV

*Note: Paul continues on the same theme, repetitive with frustration. The Galatians were under pressure from new leaders to return to Jewish practices, and Paul is under pressure to set them straight. Today is Reformation Sunday, and we're going to look at Pressure, Authority, and Discipleship. Let's hear our text from Galatians 4:*

## Under Pressure 1: Paul

Paul writes under tremendous pressure. The church he has planted in Galatia was a sweet success to him. They heard and received the gospel, but as soon as he had gone, other teachers came in and misled the people, telling them that Paul was no real apostle and that they should pursue Jewish piety rather than Christian liberty. Paul, upon hearing reports of their shifted loyalties, is under pressure to say something from a distance that might restore them to their original path. Can you imagine how he may have felt?

A dear pastor-friend of mine was enjoying his day off with friends, sailing some 90 minutes off the Florida coast. As they were relaxing and chatting, one of his friends said, "Yeah, I drove past the church this morning. It looked like a bunch of cars were in the parking lot—are we renting out for a wedding or something?" My friend thought, "Wedding? Wedding? Wedding!!!" He had forgotten! "Back! We gotta go back now!" They were 90 minutes from home, and this was before cell phones. What does one say? How do you apologize for that? Imagine that ride—the pressure of that frustration of not being able to make immediate contact.

That's Paul's situation, which is why we hear him make the same argument about no longer relying upon Law over and over. In his deep desire to correct what it is presently out of reach, he becomes emphatic and repetitive.

Perhaps you have a story like that. You're away from home and you get that call or text, your home alarm has gone off, your 90-year-old mother or grandmother has fallen, a water line has broken and is flooding the laundry room, your dog is out and running around the neighborhood—but you are on a plane, 20 minutes into a two-hour flight.

This is the pressure of helplessness. You know you could manage things if only you were there in person, but you can't get there. So what do you do? Well, whatever you can. Paul uses his head and under pressure articulates the difference between trusting in God—faith in Christ—and trusting in ourselves and the works of our own hands.

When you or I are under the pressure of helplessness, it is best not to panic, but to pray and, well, do whatever we can to bring calm, correction, and healing.

## Pressure 2: False Authority

How do you think the Galatians are feeling as they read Paul's letter? Were they ashamed that they had drifted from his message or were they feeling like they had been duped by the new leaders? It's clear: soon after Paul departed, the new teachers disregarded Paul and taught everyone to do likewise. Paul was patently disrespected, but wasn't there to defend himself and

set the people straight. The people were on their own, and were vulnerable to being misled by new teachers.

The Galatian Christians were under the pressure of false authority. Perhaps the new ministers—the ones who followed Paul—were very convincing, or very charming, or just appealed to their preference for that *Ol' Time Religion*. Whatever it was, it got the best of them. There was probably a great deal of plain old peer pressure pushing the old ways over the tipping point.

We know those pressures—false authority and peer pressure. The most common response is also the worst thing to do, and that is to give in to it.

We all have a duty love what is true and good while opposing what is false and twisted. Doing so requires thoughtful and prayerful discernment, which is what we call church *discipline*.

## Discipline is Discipling

The chief aim of all church programming is discipleship—that we should follow Jesus, be His disciples, and live according to His Word and Spirit. Whatever we do as a church—children's ministries, youth ministries, Bible studies, lifegroups, fellowship groups—all serve the same end: that we should grow in Christ and make Him known. We discipline ourselves to the new life in Christ, and where there is no discipline there is no discipleship.

To become disciples of Christ, we all require transformation and ongoing Christian formation, because we are continuously learning a growing every day we walk this earth, right?

The Christian formula for humility begins with the acknowledgement that God alone is truly good. We spend our days loving God and pursuing goodness in gratitude for his love and grace—even so we know we never fully arrive but remain in process. The day will come in which we shall be perfected, but as an act of God and not by our own power. We live toward that day and destiny, and that journey is discipleship under Christ's authority.

Here is where we run into a major culture barrier: that of authority. Who is to say how you are to be shaped, disciplined? What is authority and what does it

mean to have it and exercise it? I'll offer a simple definition:

*Authority is the right to exercise discernment.*

*Authority is the right to judge.*

“But wait—we are to judge no one, right? Isn't God the only legitimate judge?”

Yes, God alone judges the world and the worth of every soul. No human being has that authority. Our Presbyterian Book of Order opens with this statement about authority:

Almighty God, who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and set him above all rule and authority, has given to him all power in heaven and on earth, not only in this age but also in the age to come.

There is no authority on Earth that is not answerable to God. That includes the President, Congress, Senate, and Supreme Court. When we say in the Pledge of Allegiance, “One nation under God,” this is what is meant. We may not judge one another, but we acknowledge that God judges us all, because He has all authority.

But we live with lesser authorities—judges, police, parents, teachers, and professional experts. These tend to be an unpopular lot. My heart especially goes out to teachers and educators in our public schools. They are mentors, guides, and trainers to our youth. Are they also able to exercise discipline? I don't know where those boundaries are today, but we can't expect teachers to do more than they are empowered to do. Without authorization, there can be no expectation. In other words, you can't hand someone a hammer and say, “*Here—now build me a house.*”

Authority is a perfect topic for Reformation Sunday, for today above all days we celebrate the Christian awakening from false authority, as it manifest itself in medieval Roman Catholicism. Roughly a thousand years ago, the Bishop of Rome took on the title of *Pontifex Maximus*, which is the equivalent of the Roman Emperors past. Why is this or that thing true? Because the Pope says so.

In the Orthodox churches, authority is manifest in tradition, which lots of people really like. If you say, “but we've never done it that way before,” then you know the comfort of a tradition that says *we don't*

*change things.* The downside of traditionalism is that barnacles attaching to the hull of the ship end up gold-gilded. Those traditions become indistinguishable from the substance of faith.

Thank God for the Reformers—Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli, Heinrich Bollinger, and a host of lesser-known names of church leaders who reminded the whole Church that all authority is God’s alone, and His Word—Jesus Christ—is known through the Old and New Testaments of Scripture—The Bible.

To be an Evangelical—another name for Protestant—is to affirm that work, will, and person of God is met and known through Scripture and Scripture alone. From the Bible comes all authority—for how we are to think, live, and order our lives together as the Church.

The Bible—the whole counsel of God, Old and New Testaments—presents the Gospel of Jesus Christ and how we are to share it. It gives us the right understanding of the sacraments—Baptism and the Lord’s Supper—as means of God’s grace and gifts to the Church. And it gives us its authority for discipline—discipleship and disciple-making.

The Reformation tried to unite the whole Body of Christ as it exploded into Protestant growth 500 years ago in Europe, and among the statements, John Calvin set down what became widely accepted about the “True Church.” Of course, the Roman Catholic Pope said they were the true Church—the only one. The Orthodox bishops said *they* were the true Church—the only ones rightly preserving the traditions of the Apostles. John Calvin kept it very general and open when he said the True Church is characterized by three things:

1. **The right preaching of the Gospel in accordance with Scripture**
2. **The right administration of the Sacraments (only 2) as found in Scripture**
3. **The exercise of church discipline according to Scripture**

The authority of Scripture: that’s the Reformation in a nutshell.

## AUTHORITY ISSUES

How are we—you and I—with authority? Part of the American DNA is to be wary of authority. After all, we broke away from tyrant kings and corrupt state-owned churches to create a new kind of country. We don’t trust worldly authorities, and maybe this is most healthy.

A mantra of the past 60 years in America has been *Question Authority*, otherwise stated as *Who are YOU to tell ME (fill in the blank)?* Fair enough—we all have authority issues—but where there is no authority, there is no discipline, and without discipline there is no discipleship.

It’s like saying you’d like to be a blackbelt in Karate, but you won’t be instructed or coached by anyone. Good luck with that.

The false teachers who followed Paul in Galatia were successful in questioning Paul’s authority to the degree that the people were led back to serving the Law rather than the Spirit.

## Liberty in Christ

Here we connect Paul with Martin Luther, because Paul was—as we’ve heard—so insistent upon trusting our liberty in Christ that the Law held little-to-no authority over our faith.

*“Become as I am”*

he says in verse 12, meaning not “imitate me and my character because I’m such an awesome Christian,” but trust in your new liberty in Christ. We are freed from reliance upon the Law for reliance on the Holy Spirit, which is a superior authority. It can be reduced to the question:

*Who are you going to listen to?* [edit. “To Whom shall we listen?”] Your answer to this question reveals your chosen authorities:

- *Who are you going to listen to?* A doctor with degree from Johns Hopkins and 30 years experience at Sloane Kettering or some guy from Texas you saw on a YouTube video?
- *Who are you going to listen to?* Your grandmother who has lived in this world for 83 years—who loves

you and wants all the best for you—or a famous, botoxed, so-called “influencer” on Instagram?

• *Who are you going to listen to?* The timeless witness of Scripture or the latest, snarky cable news commentator?

• *Who are you going to listen to?* That question reveals your chosen authorities.

We all need some coaching. The Bible says every uncoachable vine will be cut off and burned, and even every good vine requires pruning in order to make it bear more and better fruit.

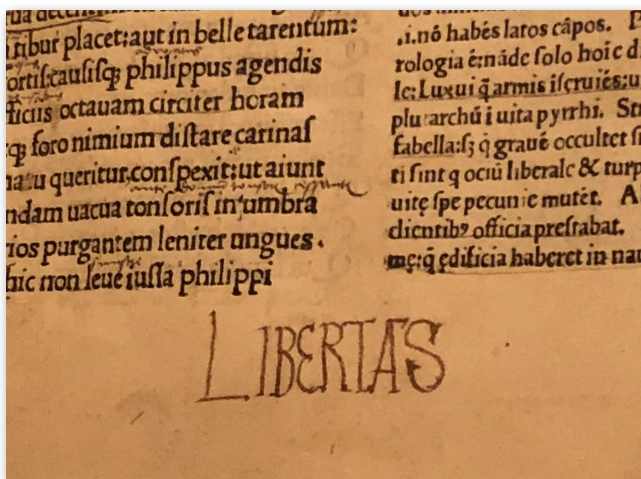
*Do you resist pruning?* Understandable.

*Do you resist being coached?* Well, you need coaching from someone—we all do.

Martin Luther, like Paul, decided he would listen to the Holy Spirit known through Scripture, and be free of the legalisms imposed by papal Roman Catholicism. That is exactly like Paul proclaiming freedom from the legalisms of Judaism and the Law.

The Reformation is a celebration of liberty in Christ, and it is the center of Paul’s gospel to the Galatians and us.

A picture: Martin Luther, in a marginal note in his own hand from one of his own books, writes:



Look how it is written—it seems to have captured his imagination and loyalty. He doesn’t just write the word, he *draws* it in all caps with a little flourish as though he’s found a title for his work and theology. Luther gets what Paul says to the Galatians and us.

Today, on Reformation Sunday, we should get it as well.

We have been freed by Christ to live in His liberty as sons and daughters of God.

We know His will, work, and person through Scripture alone, and we accept the authority of Scripture to guide us in all our pruning, coaching—in being pruned, being coached, and living this life to God’s greater glory. †

## Questions for Digestion

1. What specific pressures was Paul under as he writes to the Galatians?
2. What pressures were causing the Galatians to be mis-formed?
3. What is the most common, mistaken response to being pressured?
4. How does the absence of authority generate an absence of Christian discipline?
5. How are authority and judgment related?
6. In your own life, what authorities do you acknowledge as most significant?
7. What things make a person’s or institution’s authority illegitimate?
8. On what grounds do you establish your own authority?
9. How do we free ourselves of judgmentalism?