

HEARTS UNBOUND

Engaging Biblical Texts of God's Radical Love
through Reader's Theater

by David R. Weiss

9

GRACE AT THE TABLE AND BEYOND:
Paul's Argument for Extravagant Welcome

THE BOOK OF GALATIANS

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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Dedicated to

Michael J. Adee, M.Div., Ph.D.

in honor and celebration of his 13 years as
Executive Director and National Field Organizer
for More Light Presbyterians, for helping break down barriers
to full inclusion within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
and for his role in helping found and shepherd the
ever-growing Multi-Faith Welcoming Movement.

Introduction to Reader's Theater as a form of biblical engagement

Reader's Theater is the experience of reading a play script out loud using only the spoken lines — nothing else. The beauty of its simplicity is that it doesn't require memorized lines, costumes, sets, or polished acting, but it nevertheless invites participants to *step inside* the text — to *inhabit* it through their roles — and to experience the text more fully because they are involved in it themselves. Most of us were introduced to reader's theater during our first experience of dramatic works in middle school. These scripts invite you to revisit those middle school days as you use Reader's Theater to capture the drama and surprise of these biblical texts.

Because these scripts are only intended for use as Reader's Theater experiences, there are no extra instructions about costuming, stage movement, etc. — only the dialogue assigned to each reader.

Most biblical passages require a measure of context and scholarly insight in order for us to really understand them. In these scripts the dialogue is crafted to allow biblical characters themselves — as voiced by you, the participants — to unpack and explore key biblical texts about welcome. Also, because the biblical story (the message of God's abounding love that runs from Genesis through Revelation) is ultimately an *experience* of good news, these Reader's Theater experiences are best done in groups of 6-8 persons — so that, *just as in our faith*, there are no spectators.

Whether used by persons skeptical, curious about, or eager to explore the biblical theme of God's surprising welcome to outsiders, these Reader's Theater experiences are effective because they do three things:

1. They engage minds *imaginatively*, using the power of the participatory-narrative experience to open up and fully involve participants' intellects.
2. They help participants *evocatively* make the connections between the biblical dynamic of a welcoming God and the challenge to be welcoming today.
3. They enable participants, through scripted comments, to begin *rehearsing* what they might say in their own voices to explain and apply the dynamic of welcome in their own contexts today.

Lastly, one of the challenges of bringing biblical texts to life today is negotiating the "cultural sensitivities" that have transpired across the years. This plays out in several ways.

For instance, most of the biblical material was originally written by — and for — Jewish persons. (Though even the word "Jewish" isn't quite accurate; historically, we'd need to say "Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish persons" as each of these words best names these people at different points in their history.) So when these texts challenge *these people* to recognize God's surprising welcome, it's an example of *self-criticism*. But when Christians read these texts — especially after generations of both implicit and explicit anti-Semitic assumptions — it's very easy to hear them suggesting that the Jewish faith or tradition is intrinsically stubborn or narrow-minded, while we (of course) are not. But the truth is that stubbornness and narrow-mindedness are *human* tendencies *not* Jewish ones. In fact, it is our own stubborn, narrow-minded tendencies that tempt us to read these texts as challenging people other than ourselves. Please remember that insofar as we claim these texts as authoritative for us, they

are seeking to challenge *us*. In every text, whenever someone is challenged to recognize that God is “bigger” than they assumed, that person, no matter what their ethnic or religious background is in the text, *stands for us*. We need to hear what they need to hear. Be sure to listen.

Also, we know that gender roles were very different in the biblical era than they are today. This is not because God so ordained them, but because culture and society develop and change over time. This means, however, that some biblical texts are very male-centered and some texts display gender assumptions that we would no longer make today. I have tried to treat these instances with a balance of respect for the history they represent and sensitivity to the way we regard gender equality today.

And, you will discover, in my attempt to have these texts speak *to us* today, I occasionally allow the biblical characters to speak directly to us across time. They sometimes make references to historical or contemporary persons and events in order to help us see into the biblical text with greater insight. But even this is tricky, because my cultural and ecclesial (church tradition) knowledge and assumptions may differ markedly from yours. I try to offer references that are culturally diverse, but, if my attempts fall short or miss the mark, I hope that you will do your best to hear past my shortcomings and listen for the truth of these welcoming texts as they seek to speak to us still today.

Indeed, each of these texts invites us, as we take our place inside them as participants in God’s great drama of welcome, to find our hearts unbound. Yes, God’s radical love can be described, but every description dims next to the experience. One definition of the literary form of “gospel” explains it as a genre that aims to bequeath to its hearers the very experience it narrates. It doesn’t simply tell “good news”—*it bears good news to each person who encounters the story*. In their own humble way, each of these Reader’s Theater scripts seeks to be gospel: not simply to recreate tales in which hearts are unbound, but to unbind the hearts that do the reading. I offer them to a church that yearns to know God’s radical love more deeply in its own life. In these tales, retold in our own voices, may we discover our own hearts unbound.

~ David Weiss
Easter 2013

Introduction

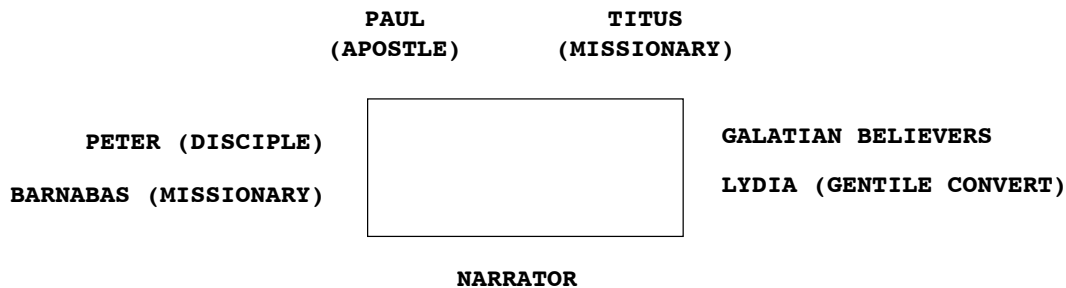
This script invites you to explore a scene in Paul's Letter to the Galatians, from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key passage. These roles are: (1) Paul, an apostle, (2) Peter, a disciple, (3) Barnabas, a missionary, (4) Titus, a Gentile missionary, (5) Galatian believers, (6) Lydia, a Gentile convert, and (7) the Narrator. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, the roles of Peter and the Galatian believers can be read by one person, or the Narrator's role can be shared by two persons.

Paul and the Narrator are the largest roles; the smallest roles are Peter and the Galatian believers. The remaining roles are all about the same. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

The Narrator will guide you through the scenes, reading from Galatians and other texts to begin each brief conversation and offering occasional insights. The Narrator likely hasn't seen any of this material before either, so this person isn't the "expert," their role is simply to keep things moving along. You'll have a chance to add your own comments and questions at the end, so feel free to take notes along the way, but follow the script until you're invited to make your own remarks at the end.

Remember, this isn't a play where the goal is "perfect performance;" rather, it's a series of invitations to slip into the text ourselves and listen for a moment to discover what more we can hear within and between the lines of these important texts.

Suggestion: *It will help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrator sits at one end of the group, with Peter and Barnabas to one side and Lydia and the Galatian believers to the other side. Paul and Titus might sit opposite the Narrator. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.*



READER'S THEATER SCRIPT**NARRATOR:**

Our task is to revisit several key passages in Paul's Letter to the Galatians and to reflect on them from the perspective of the original participants. Let's begin by going around the table to introduce ourselves by our real names and then also by the roles we'll be reading.

BARNABAS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Barnabas**, an early Jewish Christian and a companion of Paul on several missionary journeys.

PETER:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Peter**, one of the original twelve disciples. Peter was often seen as a leader of the disciples (and of the early church). Along with the apostle Paul, Peter gets special credit for helping to open the church to the Gentiles (non-Jews).

PAUL:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Paul**, the most well-known missionary in the early church. Paul was not one of Jesus' disciples; in fact, he was a devout Jew who initially persecuted the early church. But his life was re-directed after a vision of the risen Jesus in which he was sent to preach to the Gentiles. He became the loudest voice in the early church for their full welcome into the Christian church without needing to become observant Jews first.

TITUS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Titus**, an early Gentile convert to Christianity and a companion of Paul on several missionary journeys.

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Galatians**, a group of Gentile believers. The Galatians were converted to Christianity by Paul himself, but they later had doubts about whether they also needed to become observant Jews in order to receive

God's grace.

LYDIA:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Lydia**, a Gentile woman converted by Paul in Acts 16. Lydia is *not* part of the Galatian community. Although her character is based on a person who does appear in the Book of Acts, her voice is brought into this Reader's Theater by the author's imagination, not by history. Her character will add insight into this text from her own perspective.

NARRATOR:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator**. In this role I will read much of the direct biblical material. I'll also help us transition from scene to scene, and I'll occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

NARRATOR:

We'll open the conversation by reading from the start of the Letter to the Galatians: "I am astonished that you have so soon turned away from the One who called you by the grace of Christ, and have turned to a different gospel – one which is really not 'good news' at all. Some who wish to alter the Good News of Christ must have confused you. For if we – or even angels from heaven – should preach to you a different gospel, one not in accord with the gospel we delivered to you, let us – or them – be cursed! We've said it before and I'll say it again: if any preach a gospel to you that is contrary to the one you received, let them be cursed!" (Galatians 1:6-9 *TIB*)

PAUL:

Can you tell I'm a little upset? Let me explain. A lot of people think it was just about the preparation of food and the practice of circumcision. Or just about certain *rules*. But it was about much more than that. It was about *grace*. It was about the very foundation of our life in Christ. It touched *everything*. That's why it mattered so much. That's why I got so angry. And, honestly, at times this confusion seemed to be everywhere in the early church.

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

Well, this was the confusion in Galatia. Paul had come preaching a gospel of full freedom to us. He told us how, in Jesus, human beings were offered new life. He said that our relationship with God – and also with each other – could be fundamentally transformed. And that this came from God through Jesus – *as pure gift*. It was *grace*, received in *faith*. And as we believed, this grace re-shaped the whole way we lived our lives. We moved with deeper joy and trust. We seemed to live in a deeper reality right here and now... until –

PAUL:

Until, certain persons arrived after I left. They came claiming to be followers of Jesus, but they told the Galatians that to be truly “right with God” they needed *more* than just faith. As if that were possible! As if faith itself weren’t everything!

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

They told us that we needed to observe the Jewish laws to really follow Jesus. After all, Jesus was Jewish. They spoke with authority. And we began to wonder if we had believed Paul too quickly. Our meals became occasions for anxiety. Were we eating ourselves away from God? Our faith faltered. And the circumcision question was especially troubling.

BARNABAS:

Circumcision was at the center of it. Even more than the Jewish food laws, ever since Abraham, circumcision was seen by Jews as the primary sign of the promise God made to them. Every Jewish male was circumcised. Without exception. And any Gentiles who desired to fully embrace the Jewish faith had to become circumcised themselves. Remember, this letter to the Galatians was written only 20-25 years after Jesus’ ministry. Many people still regarded Jesus’ followers as pursuing another way of being Jewish. There were Pharisees and Sadducees and Essenes and a host of other Jewish sects. There were *many* ways of being Jewish – but all of them involved being circumcised. It only made sense that anyone following the teaching of Jesus would need to be circumcised, too.

PAUL:

It only made sense if you ignored the revelation that was bound up *with* Jesus. That's why I wrote to the Galatians to remind them of the gospel I had proclaimed in their midst just a few years earlier.

NARRATOR:

These are Paul's words in the third chapter of his letter to the Galatians: "Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, if you belong to Christ, you are the offspring of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised." (Galatians 3:26-29 *TIB*)

PAUL:

For Gentiles it didn't begin with circumcision but with baptism. When they were baptized into Christ *that* was their sign of the promise made by God to them. And before you think that this was a little too easy for them, consider what was involved.

TITUS:

Let me explain. I'm an uncircumcised Gentile. Now, nobody enjoyed getting circumcised – especially not as an adult. But listen to what *baptism* meant for me. As a Gentile I grew up in a world marked by hierarchy. Your nationality, combined with your status as slave or free, rich or poor, male or female, gave you a place in a complex pecking order in Roman society. It was a world where everything had its place in a pyramid of power. I counted on all of these social labels to tell me who had the most status and power, and who had the least – to whom I owed respect, and from whom I could demand respect. My whole worldview was shaped by these power relationships. But baptism *changed everything*. To have all these status markers washed away in baptism was a much bigger deal than losing my foreskin. It cost me my privilege.... But it gave me my life.

LYDIA:

That's just as true for women. Paul's vision of life in Christ gave us

a new dignity, but it challenged us to be more than we had ever been. He wasn't dreaming. He knew that the church was made up of different people. There still were Jews and Greeks. There still were slaves and free. And there still were men and women. But his claim was that after baptism – because those differences made no difference to God – they no longer had any power to distort our relationships with one another. We were all still different. But we were freed from the way those differences divided us, and we were freed to serve one another in love.

PAUL:

That's what was at stake here. The very shape of our life together in Christ. Because, *if* the food we ate – or the foreskins we cut off – gave us a higher place before God, then grace – the free gift of God's love for us – wasn't really grace after all. And then sooner or later all of our relationships with one another would be distorted by power and status all over again.

BARNABAS:

We had battled this before. In Antioch our work had been undone when some Jewish believers came down from Jerusalem and began telling the Gentiles that they weren't real believers unless they changed their whole lifestyle. Like the Galatians, they were told they needed not only to start following a Jewish diet, but also to get circumcised.

TITUS:

Paul was furious then, too. Paul and Barnabas led a small delegation to Jerusalem, and I went, too. As a Gentile believer, I had a lot at stake in whether the larger church would confirm Paul's message. In writing to the Galatians, Paul described that earlier meeting in Jerusalem. He explained that he set out before the leaders in Jerusalem exactly what he was preaching in order "to make sure that the course I was pursuing, or had pursued, was not useless." (Galatians 2:2b *TIB*) He wanted the Galatians to know he had fought for – and won – the blessing of the church for his message of good news. He assured them that "recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James, Peter and John – these leaders, these pillars – shook hands with Barnabas and me as a sign of partnership: we were to go to the Gentiles and they to the Jews." (Galatians 2:9 *TIB*)

BARNABAS :

This meeting, known later as the Council of Jerusalem, is described by Paul here and later by Luke in the Book of Acts* (chapter 15). It was apparently the first attempt by the early church, around the year 50, to reach an "official" decision about Paul's declaration of extravagant welcome to the Gentiles. Although Paul says that Peter, James, and John all endorse his mission, and Luke has both Peter and James speak eloquently on behalf of welcome to Gentiles, it would be years before all the controversy regarding the unconditional welcome to Gentiles subsided. And Paul would remain at the center – of both the welcome and the controversy.

*Session 8 in this series explores the Council of Jerusalem.

TITUS :

In fact, the church at Jerusalem sent both a letter and two emissaries (Judas and Silas) back to Antioch with the original delegation to confirm that Paul's proclamation was valid. But not long afterwards, trouble found its way to Antioch again. Paul reports this incident to the Galatians as well, perhaps to show that he was ready to oppose anyone who hedged on the absoluteness of grace and faith – even Peter himself.

Then the apostles and elders decided, in agreement with the whole Jerusalem church, to choose delegates to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas known as Barsabbas and Silas, both leading members of the community. They were to deliver this letter: "From the apostles and elders, to our Gentile sisters and brothers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings! We hear that some of our number, without any instructions from us, have upset you with their discussions and disturbed your peace of mind. Therefore, we have unanimously resolved to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the name of Jesus Christ. So we are sending you Judas and Silas, who will convey this message by word of mouth." (Acts 15:22-27 *TIB*)

NARRATOR :

We read Paul's record of these in Galatians, chapter 2: "When Peter came to Antioch, however, I opposed him to his face, since he was manifestly in the wrong. His custom had been to eat with the Gentiles but, after certain friends of James arrived, he stopped doing this and kept away from them altogether, for fear of the group that insists Gentiles must convert to Judaism first. The other Jews joined him in

this hypocrisy, and even Barnabas felt obliged to copy this behavior. When I saw they weren't respecting the true meaning of the Good News, I said to Peter in front of everyone, 'You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not a Jew. So why do you want to make the Gentiles adopt Jewish ways? Though we're Jewish by nature and not Gentile "sinners," we know that people aren't justified by following the Law, but by believing in Jesus Christ.'" (Galatians 2:11-16 *TIB*)

PETER:

Those of you who know me, know that this wasn't the first time my actions fell short of my ideals. I'd been eager to walk on water, but I quickly sank. I'd been certain that of all the disciples, I would be at Christ's side until the end, but I denied him at the fireside only hours after my boasting. And in the Book of Acts (chapter 10), even before the Council of Jerusalem, I had received the vision of unclean foods – declared clean by God. I realized the foods were a metaphor for the Gentiles and that God was declaring the Gentiles "clean" – acceptable just as they were. I had a role in welcoming the first Gentiles into the church.

Peter spoke up and said, "If it is really you, tell me to come to you across the water." "Come!" Jesus said. So Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how strong the wind was, he became frightened. He began to sink, and cried out, "Save me!" Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and caught Peter. "You have so little faith!" Jesus said to him. "Why did you doubt?" (Matthew 14:28-31 *TIB*)

The accounts of Peter's boasting and denial are found in Matthew 26:30-35, 69-75, with parallels in Mark and Luke.

Peter's vision of forbidden foods and subsequent encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10 is the subject of Session 7 in this series.

NARRATOR:

Following his vision, Peter was asked to go visit Cornelius, a Gentile. He went and preached the good news about Jesus to Cornelius and his entire household. As he finished speaking, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon all of them, both the circumcised believers who

Peter had not finished speaking these words when the Holy Spirit descended upon all who were listening to the message. The Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter were surprised that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. (Acts 10:44-45 *TIB*)

had come with Peter – and also upon Cornelius and his household.

PETER:

These people weren't Jews. They ate unclean foods. They weren't circumcised. And yet the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them! It was as though God had ushered them into "my" church and announced, "These folks are with me." I immediately directed the believers with me to baptize them. Afterwards we stayed on for several days, teaching them more about Jesus and being amazed to find ourselves having *fellowship* with persons we once thought were forbidden to us.

NARRATOR:

But the church back in Jerusalem was not so quickly amazed, as we hear in Acts, chapter 11: "The apostles and the community in Judea heard that Gentiles, too, had accepted the word of God. As a result, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, some of the Jewish believers took issue with him. 'So you have been visiting the Gentiles and eating with them, have you?' they said." (Acts 11:1-3 *TIB*)

PETER:

I responded to their question by telling them again everything that had happened. In fact, the way Luke records it in the Book of Acts, my response in chapter 11 (Acts 11:4-17) repeats most of what he had just described in chapter 10 because he wants to make sure that none of his readers missed it the first time. And it's pretty clear: the issue is about food... and foreskins. It's about the type of people you eat with, and the type of food you're likely to eat with them. Well, after I explained my vision and my experience with Cornelius, Luke wrote that their criticism was silenced and they began to praise God. So, you see, I *knew* about God's welcome to the Gentiles. *I was part of it.* When I first went to Antioch, I didn't hesitate to join the Gentiles at their table. But... later on, when others from Jerusalem came, I felt their watchful eyes on my every move. I knew they had misgivings about our table fellowship, and, yes, I drew back.

PAUL:

In Antioch it wasn't just about the food either. I refer to these folks from Jerusalem as the circumcision faction or party (literally, "those of the circumcision") in Galatians 2:12. But even beyond circumcision,

it was about what it took to be good enough, holy enough, for God. It was about what the Gentiles supposedly needed to do before or after "faith" in order to make sure that grace would cover them as well.

BARNABAS:

And about how separate we Jews needed to keep ourselves to make sure that our holiness, our chosen-ness, our grace, wasn't spoiled by them. I admit, when Peter drew back, it shook even me. I had worked alongside Paul for years, but Peter was one of the Twelve. In many ways he was *first* among the Twelve. It seemed best to play it safe.

PAUL:

How do you "play it safe" with the truth of the gospel?! I'm far from perfect myself, but I knew that on this point, either I insisted that faith was all that was needed – or we lost everything. The gospel of Jesus Christ hung in the balance, and while I had no desire to confront Peter, there was too much at stake to be silent. So I asked him, "How is it that just a few days ago you were living like a Gentile – eating at their tables? And now all of a sudden your own actions suggest that they must become like you in order to be full members of the family of God? How does that work?"

TITUS:

You might have noticed above that Paul also said he and Peter were both "Jewish by nature and not Gentile 'sinners.'" (Galatians 2:16) That's what I am: a Gentile "sinner." But this is important to understand: he calls us "sinners" not because of what we've *done* but because of who we *were*. From a Jewish perspective, simply to be a Gentile meant that we were somehow unclean, unfit for good company, unable to be near to God. We hadn't *done* anything, there was just something *queer* about us. And Paul's point is that even he and Peter, who were not "sinners" in the way we were, even they knew that their rightness with God didn't rest on anything they did. It rested entirely on their faith in Jesus. Paul was reminding Peter that both Jews and Gentiles received God's grace as sheer gift.

NARRATOR:

Having been down this road before, Paul was exasperated with the Galatians themselves, and it showed in his tone. He writes in chapter 3, verses 1-3: "You foolish Galatians! Who has cast a spell over you, in spite of the clear and public portrayal you have had of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ? Let me ask you one question: was it because you practiced the Law that you received the Holy Spirit or because you believed what was preached to you? Are you so foolish that, having begun by the Spirit, you would now try to finish with human effort?" (Galatians 3:1-3 *TIB*)

PAUL:

Of course, they hadn't seen Jesus crucified, but I had come *preaching* Christ crucified, and that was how their faith began. They had heard from the very start that Jesus had staked everything – even his life – on the absolute graciousness of God. Like Cornelius and his household, like the believers in Antioch, they had already heard the gospel and believed, and through their belief they had received the Spirit. Someone must have bewitched them to convince them that yet more was required. *They already knew otherwise. They had already experienced otherwise.* And yet now they were being tempted to think that what we humans do – "the flesh" as I call it – can somehow add something to God's grace.

As for myself, sisters and brothers, when I came to you I did not come proclaiming God's testimony with any particular eloquence or wisdom. No, I determined that while I was with you I would know nothing but Jesus Christ – Christ crucified. (1 Corinthians 2:1-2 *TIB*)

TITUS:

Paul didn't mince words when it came to his opponents, either. Of those who were doing the tempting, he exclaimed, "May their knives slip!" (Galatians 5:12b *TIB*). Some commentators think this suggests that Paul's opponents in Galatia were not Jewish believers, but Gentiles like me, though these were Gentile men who had agreed to get circumcised and who were now insisting that other men submit to the same ritual. Paul's language here could be read to say, "I wish when they were being circumcised, the knife had slipped and cut everything off!" It's a pretty strong image, but for Paul, if circumcision won the day, then grace was lost altogether. The stakes were high enough to

require strong language.

NARRATOR:

Paul implored them to remember what they once knew. These are some of his words from chapter 5 and chapter 6 of his Letter to the Galatians: "When Christ freed us, we were meant to remain free. Stand firm, therefore, and don't submit to the yoke of slavery a second time! Pay close attention to me – Paul – when I tell you that if you let yourself be subjected to the Law, Christ will be of no use to you!... In Christ Jesus neither adherence to the Law nor disregard of it counts for anything – only faith, which expresses itself through love... My sisters and brothers, you were called to freedom... [so] serve one another in works of love, since the whole of the Law is summarized in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'... It means nothing whether one bothers with the externals of religion or not. All that matters is that one is created anew." (Galatians 5:1-2, 6, 13; 6:15 TIB)

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

We were torn. Like Titus explained earlier, all of us were born into a Roman society where each person was "more than" or "less than" the people around them. Our dealings with everyone were defined by status. Sure, we heard Paul's message of grace, and it was appealing – in an unfamiliar, disorienting sort of way. And when those Jewish Christians arrived from Jerusalem with their insistence that only circumcision and full obedience to the rest of the Law could make us "complete" Christians, it was easy to be swayed by their words. Nobody wants to believe they're "less than" or deficient somehow. But, we were raised in a society that trained us to believe people have different levels of value. In that sense, the circumcision faction's message, though not such "Good News" to us, was at least familiar. We spoke that language in our earlier lives.

PAUL:

For my part, I was convinced that in Christ a new creation *had begun*, one in which neither foods nor foreskins meant anything. I was convinced that in Christ, neither nationality nor wealth nor status had to divide us. I was convinced that in Christ we had been set free for love. I had seen the first fruits of this in Galatia a couple years

earlier.

BARNABAS :

And Paul was determined to see the full harvest ripen. But he didn't expect it to "just happen." He knew that, just as food laws and the rite of circumcision had profoundly shaped the identity of the Jews, other rites would shape the Christian community in equally profound ways. That's why baptism and the Lord's Supper were at the heart of Paul's theology – and why he placed them at the heart of his churches.

PAUL :

Remember where we started? I told the Galatians that in baptism they clothed themselves with Christ. Their relationship to God was determined entirely by being clothed with Christ. And, in the same way, their relationship to one another was determined entirely by being clothed with Christ. So baptism was completely personal, because for each person – one by one – it affirmed them as children of God. And yet it was also completely communal because if each person was a child of God then all were equally members of God's family and brothers and sisters to one another.

BARNABAS :

In a world where both beliefs and practices reinforced divisions, Christian baptism made us one body, not by erasing our differences but by erasing the different values the world put on them. When Paul likened the church to the body with its many members (1 Corinthians 12:12-30), he was saying that every gift, every difference, helps make the community whole.

TITUS :

Elsewhere Paul said that being in Christ gave each of us "free speech." This word, often translated "acting with boldness," actually named the singular right of free speech enjoyed only by free males citizens of the empire. It was a word that was unmistakable in its meaning, especially for those of us who were Gentiles. Forbidden

With such hope we are very bold in what we say. (2 Corinthians 3:12 *TIB*)

The word translated here as "bold" is, *parresia*. The sense of it as "free speech" comes from Prof. David Fredrickson. See "Free Speech in Pauline Political Theology," *Word & World*, 12:4 (1992), pp. 345-351.

to women, aliens, and slaves, *parresia* – free speech – was the cherished privilege to join the conversation that shaped the life of the community. Every Gentile who heard Paul's words knew that when he said free speech belonged to everyone who was in Christ, he meant that baptism made us members of a community where every voice mattered because in this community everyone was a citizen.

LYDIA:

This is where I come in. I'm not from either Antioch nor Galatia. I have no obvious place in this passage, but I am one of the few women named in the early church – and a Gentile woman at that. And, for me, Paul's conviction that the Christian church was not simply a Sunday morning worship experience but a whole new way of *being in community* made all the difference. Luke writes, "Christ opened (my) heart to accept what Paul was saying." (Acts 16:14b *TIB*) And what Paul was saying was not just about my place in the world to come, but also about my place – and all of our places – in the world coming to be here and now. I was eager to hear *that*.

NARRATOR:

The Book of Acts speaks of "Lydia, a devout woman" (Acts 16:14a *TIB*), which indicates she was a Gentile woman who already honored God by respecting Jewish tradition to some extent. She is described as being "from the town of Thyatira" and being "in the purple-dye trade." (Acts 16:14a *TIB*) Because purple cloth was produced using an expensive dye extracted from sea snails and was available only to the elite, commentators have traditionally assumed that Lydia herself was a wealthy merchant.

LYDIA:

But here is one place where the distance between your world and mine becomes clear – and a place where Paul's promise that every voice matters mean so much. My name, Lydia, is not a typical Greek personal name. In fact, it comes from a place named Lydia – and usually only slaves were named after places. Literally, my name means simply, "the woman from Lydia," and there were doubtless many slaves whose identity in the Roman world was simply that: the woman from Lydia. They had no recognition, no status, no voice, beyond that nameless name.

NARRATOR:

It turns out there were two sources of purple dye in the ancient world. Besides the expensive dye made from snails, there was another source: the root of the madder plant, a river plant common in the region of Thyatira. This plant-based dye produced a cheaper purple cloth, a bit like the “knock-off” brands available today that imitate designer lines of clothing. Making dye from these plants was a hard and dirty process – not unlike your sweatshops today. In fact, extracting the dye and treating the cloth, a process that used animal urine, was so foul smelling that dye-workers were only allowed to work outside the city limits... which is exactly where Paul met Lydia: “along the river outside the gates” of the city (Acts 16:13 *TIB*).

In addition to the scholarly sources cited below, my imaginative direction for Lydia in this script was sparked by a reflection on the website Alabaster Jars (www.alabaster-jars.com/biblewomen-1.html) and a Bible Study on Lydia found on the website for the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (www.warc.ch/dp/bs37/07.html).

The prevailing view among commentators is still to regard Lydia as a woman of means, because of her association with purple dye and/or cloth. But, given that this Reader’s Theater series is intended to help us hear voices in fresh ways, I’ve given Lydia a voice seldom heard, but with some scholarly support. ~DW

On the possibility of her low status and on the unattractive aspects of the purple dye trade, see:

Lynn H. Cohick, *Women in the World of Earliest Christians: illuminating ancient ways of life*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic), 188.

Ivoni Richter Reimer, *Women in the Acts of the Apostles: A Feminist Liberation Perspective* [trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 1995], 98-105.

Richard L. Rohrbaugh, “The Pre-Industrial City in Luke-Acts: Urban Social Relations,” in Jerome Neyrey (ed.), *The Social World of Luke-Acts: Models for Interpretation* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991], pp. 125-49, esp. 133-37.

Luise Schottroff, “Lydia: A New Quality of Power” in *Let the Oppressed Go Free: Feminist Perspectives on the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), 131-137.

F. Scott Spencer, *Acts (Readings: a new commentary)* Sheffield Academic Press, 1997, 165.

F. Scott Spencer, “Women of ‘the Cloth’ in Acts: Sewing the Word” in *Dancing Girls, Loose Ladies, And Women Of The Cloth: The Women In Jesus’ Life* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 166-191.

LYDIA:

Thyatira, the region I came from, was famous for its many guilds of artisans – and for using slave labor to produce cheap purple cloth. Many slaves, if they were lucky enough to gain their freedom, continued to use their trade skills to eke out a living.

NARRATOR:

In fact, there were groups of former slaves trained as dye-workers who would travel around working “in the purple-dye trade” together, like a band of migrant workers moving through the countryside. Trained within a guild system, and united by their common skill – and their common past as slaves – they set up their own “houses.” We will never know for sure, but as we seek to understand that distant world on its own terms, it seems likely that Lydia was a former slave, nameless beyond the region in which she was once owned, now living within a “household” of former slaves. She was perhaps a leader within that household, but it was quite possibly a household of marginalized persons, still living at the margins of the city, still carrying on their bodies, from elbows to fingertips the smell of the marginal status that never quite got washed away.

LYDIA:

But listen, in Paul’s words, we heard about a washing that *did* wash away the scorn that marked our past – and present – lifestyle. We were a household of nobodies, but clothed in Christ, we were *each* a child of God. Having learned to live in our own household, Paul invited us to imagine ourselves as part of God’s household, linked to Christians everywhere. We were persons denied both a name and a voice for all of our lives. Now, in baptism, we received a citizenship we could barely imagine! Often in the early church the gift of speaking in tongues was seen as the sign of the Spirit’s presence. But for us, the fact that we were now given the chance to speak at all, using our own words in our native tongues – this was more miracle than we had dreamed of.

BARNABAS:

The Last Supper was another ritual where Paul saw the gospel *happening* – and not just to individuals, but to the whole gathered community. It was a holy moment when the vision of Christian community found in his

Letter to the Galatians came to life. People heard the story of Jesus and tasted for themselves the astonishing grace of God. They practiced the unity that Paul preached.... Or, if they didn't, he exploded as fiercely as he had to the Galatians.

NARRATOR:

This passage comes from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians and concerns reports he has received about their practice of the Lord's Supper: "What I now have to say is not said in praise. Your meetings do more harm than good. In the first place, I hear that when you gather for a meeting there are divisions among you, and I'm inclined to believe it. No doubt there have to be factions among you, to distinguish those who are to be trusted from those who aren't. The point is, when you hold your agape meals, it is not the Eucharist you've been commemorating, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anyone else. One remains hungry while another gets drunk. Don't you have homes where you can eat and drink? Surely you have enough respect for the community of God not to embarrass the poor people! What can I say to you? You'll get no praise from me in this matter!... Those who eat and drink without discerning the Body of Christ eat and drink condemnation on themselves." (1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 29 *TIB*)

BARNABAS:

Paul's anger here is not because of division caused by attitudes around circumcision or kosher food. Here it was wealth and status that fractured the community. And these were just as dangerous to the gospel. When this Corinthian community gathered for worship, like many early Christian communities, they shared a sort of potluck meal that led into a time of telling stories and singing hymns and culminated in the Last Supper. But in Corinth the wealthy members of the community came early with their food and started eating, while those who were servants or slaves arrived later, finding only crumbs left. So by the time they celebrated the Last Supper, the divisions between the haves and the have-nots, far from disappearing, were etched in the hunger and humiliation of those who came last. It was precisely what the meal was *not* supposed to be.

GALATIAN BELIEVERS:

Paul's anger, at us, at Peter, and at the Corinthians, was *real* exactly because his experience of grace was *real*. Jesus sometimes spoke of the Kingdom of God as "at hand" – near enough to touch. (Mark 1:15 *TIB*) Paul seemed to touch that kingdom regularly, and he invited the rest of us to join him there. We lived out of that free gift of God's love – or we altogether failed to live in grace. In the early church Paul hoped that baptism and the Last Supper would *be* moments of grace for us. And while they were occasionally moments of disagreement and failure, they were more often than not opportunities for the Spirit to touch our lives, claiming us exactly as we were for grace.. at the table and far beyond.

LYDIA:

The church two thousand years ago was brimful of people with differences. You might say we had more difference than we knew what to do with. Some – such as the possibility that, far from being a woman of means, I was a former slave – are more invisible to you than they were to us. Others – like race, class, and gender – are still sources of division for you today. And some of the differences we struggled with back then – like circumcision and kosher food – don't matter much to you today because, I suppose, you've found new differences to focus on instead. But for you, just as for us, Paul's words remain like a beacon of what can be, *because truly it already is*: "Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28 *TIB*)

* * *

[End of scripted conversation. However, instructions for an informal conversation continue on the next page.]