"Holy Aspirations II"
Sermon for 10 January 2016
Text: Galatians 1:9-17

"Passionately seeking conformity with Jesus Christ" is Holy Aspiration II. It follows Aspiration I which was "Passionately desiring more of God." Now I hadn't given the example of Paul with regard to this aspiration of "conformity to Christ" much consideration prior to a New Year's Eve exchange over the apostle. I was with a person who announced his hatred of Paul is vivid terms, in full technicolor hostility. Although I didn't share this thought at the time, I realized that to hate Paul is to hate Jesus and, further, that to hate either of them at all is reprehensible. This brief tirade took viewpoint intolerance to a whole new level! I believe the speaker equated Paul with "total disaster" and, I believe inaccurately, put Jesus and Paul in absolute opposition. Point in question: what does having the mind of Christ (as Paul undoubtedly did) have to do with "conformity to Christ" (irrespective of differences of opinion on social and/or theological concerns)?

In view of this current exchange, Galatians 1 has some astonishing currency. Verse 10 reads: **For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?** Paul was no people-pleaser. He didn't please the Jews of his heritage, the Jewish converts to Christianity (who had come to address *the deficiency they perceived* in his gospel to the Gentiles) or the Gentile populace. If we rephrase this question to expose the rhetorical intent, it might read as this: "Am I now to be understood as seeking to please men whereas I have never, and at get personal cost, been willing to do that before?!" (The implied answer is, of course not.) Here's a little something I picked up on the way to writing this sermon. The root meaning of the word Pharisee is "separated." This means that Pharisees were religious Separatists. Step, if you would, into the historical time machine and cruise to Reformation England (the 16th and 17th century). Upon arrival, you would discover a protestant group known as Separatists. The Pilgrims were Separatists. And so were some of the Non-conformists known as Congregationalists. Roman Catholics and Anglicans were in agreement in their rejection of Separatists. Back in the time travel buggy, we arrive in twentieth century England (Oxford, 1969). There, I experienced a hefty taste of religious persecution/discrimination as a Non-conformist. Because of my Separatist/Non-conformist/Congregationalist heritage, I would not be allowed to attain a place at many Oxford colleges (names withheld). I also learned that Non-conformists were refused the vote, or the right to hold public office! I am positive that most of those who enforced this tired, old prejudice either had no idea why it existed *and probably could have cared less.* BUT, I felt a connection with Paul that resonated on this note of Separatism. Separatists were those who, by force of conviction, felt they had to leave the communion of a corrupted church order—one more dependent upon human authority and tradition than upon the pure gospel and the holy word of God.

That's the core of the controversy in Galatians: are we going to submit to divine authority, or the traditions of man? Spiritual truth and religion can and do part company; Separatists see that potential divide actuated and act accordingly. It is a

kind of Joshua 24:14 moment: **"Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. 15And if it is evil in your eyes to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. <u>But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD</u>."**

So listen carefully to what Paul is asserting; namely, that his conformity to Christ has a divine origin: **But when He who had <u>set me apart before I was born</u>, and <u>who called me by His grace</u> was *pleased to reveal HIs Son to me.*** (vv. 15-16)—the initiative is ever with God!—Paul, like Moses, Isaiah (49:1) and John the Baptist (Luke 1:13-17) before him, was predestined to the work of preaching Christ **to the Gentiles.** Paul also ascribes his gospel to a divine origin: **in order that I might preach Him** (this being the core of Paul's gospel: **Christ and Him crucified**) **to the Gentiles. Called by His grace** (a sheer and unmerited favor) and **pleased to reveal His Son to me** (revelation is the key ingredient here), **I did <u>not</u> immediately consult with anyone . . . I did not go up to Jerusalem** (to be approved, authorized or instructed by **those who were apostles before me.** (vv. 15-17) Paul did not look for approval or authorization from the twelve; he did not acknowledge either their primacy or their authority. Why? Because the revelation was definitive, complete, lacking in nothing. Paul did not need further instruction in the matters perfectly revealed to him! He got it. Revelation is like that. It is direct. It is authoritative: convincing, compelling and convicting.

Paul met with the crucified and risen Lord. Paul received his revelation truth from the source of revelation truth directly. No one had to check it out, verify it or validate it. Now the religious authorities found this intolerable—just as they did in the case of Jesus Christ. They wanted to manage it, control it, be in charge. Such is human pride! And, frankly, human insecurity as well. It is almost as if those who came down from Jerusalem didn't believe that God could manage His church without their input, their spin. As it turns out, they were guilty of promulgating a false doctrine, a religious system founded on mistrust of God. Just like back in Eden! While this is pretty obvious, let's walk through a few items of Paul's conformity to Christ—which originated in his conversion and took over more and more of his being the longer he lived and served. Jesus only spoke the words He heard His Father speaking. Paul, with regard to his gospel, only spoke the words he heard the risen Lord speak. **What I received, I passed on to you** (1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Cor. 11:23ff) Jesus, *as the Risen Lord,* was revelation truth to Paul; Paul walked by <u>revelation truth</u> in a direct manner. Jesus preached, Paul preached. Jesus lived self-sacrificially, so did Paul. 1 Cor. 11:1**Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. 2Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you.** Both Jesus and Paul sorted a few things out with God in the desert places, in the wilderness. Paul sought to move from holy to holier, from pure to purer and pursued spiritual and moral perfection (indeed as we all ought to do). Paul embraced these commands (be holy, be pure and be perfect) as the best commandments in God's word! He passionately

sought conformity to his Lord Jesus Christ. Let us pray for each other to grow in this regard.

Amen