

# DEFAULT SETTINGS

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***GALATIANS 1:1-12***  
***LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH***  
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***MAY 29, 2016/2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST***

I want to talk this morning about default settings.

For many of us, I suspect the term conjures up adventures in the land of technological devices. Perhaps even more specifically, dealing with *problems* in the land of technological devices.

My strategy, when dealing with almost any problem technological, is to start from the beginning. If my TV or phone or computer isn't working like it should, I unplug it, wait ten seconds, and plug it in again. What does this do? It resets the system. It goes, in a sense, back to the beginning.

But this morning I want us to think about the term "default setting" in a different domain. I want us to think about the term as it relates to *ourselves*.

What are *our* default settings as human beings? What attitudes and behaviours do we revert to instinctively? How do we respond when life gets complicated or frustrating? What patterns do we slide back into when the way forward seems to ask too much of us?

The word "default" literally refers to a *failure* to do something. The French and Latin origins of the word mean "to fail" or "to disappoint."

It speaks of inactivity. If we default on a loan, we simply don't pay back what we owe. In computer science, the term refers to what the program will do when it has no inputs from a user. If a political party wins by default it's because there is a *lack* of opposition.

We have defaults in all kinds of ways:

- in parenting
- in how we respond to conflict
- in how we relate to our spouses
- in the habits that we daily slide into
- in the kinds of things we read or ideas we decide to be open to

We do all of this for obvious reasons. There is comfort in what is familiar. It's a way of managing uncertainty and difficulty. We can only handle so much newness and unpredictability and decision-making. Sometimes we simply don't have time or energy to weigh all the options and come to a carefully reasoned response.

So we often choose the path of least resistance.

I confess that *sometimes* (very rarely, of course!), I do this in my preaching. Because our church tends to follow the three-year lectionary cycle when it comes to the texts we use in worship each week, and because I've been here for nearly five years now, I now have the luxury of being presented with a text and saying, 'hmm, what did I say about that *last* time?' Or, because I've been writing online for nearly a decade now, I think "I wonder if I've written anything about this on my blog that I could use?" 😊

If something has worked reasonably well in the past—or even if it hasn't failed spectacularly!—we figure it's a good enough response in the present.

We also do this in our churches. We *default* to familiar patterns, well-worn ways of doing things, default understandings of how God works in the world.

Sometimes this is healthy. Sometimes it is *necessary*. Sometimes the best thing we can do is to go back to the beginning in our relationships with God, going back to basic truths that we have known since we were children. Sometimes there is deep wisdom from the past that we ignore at our peril.

So I want to be very clear that in what follows I am not *in any way* saying that the life of faith requires that we be constantly reinventing ourselves or our churches. There is a

profound sense in which we *receive* the faith, the practices, the beliefs and traditions that have been handed down to us from Christians who have gone before us.

Having said that, while we acknowledge that our faith is deeply rooted in history, I think we all know that there are times when our default settings are not the right option at all. There are times when those who have gone before us were just plain wrong or misguided. There are times when our natural inclinations lead us astray.

And it's this more negative aspect of our default settings that our text invites us into and that I want to focus on for the remainder of the sermon.

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Our text this morning comes from Paul's letter to the church in Galatia.

Galatians without question represents Paul at his angriest.

Why? Well, he's angry with the Gentile Christians for defaulting to a "different gospel" which is actually no gospel at all. He's distraught they are reverting back to a pre-Christian ways of understanding how God and faith work.

He's angry with Jewish teachers who are defaulting to old reliance on the Jewish law and ritual demanding that new converts to Christianity adopt the Jewish rite of circumcision.

(Indeed, Paul has a very colourful way of describing what those who are advocating this practice ought to go and do to themselves in Galatians 5:12!)

He's angry at the whole situation where these two groups of people who had been brought together in Christ are reverting back to distinctions between "us" and "them," old categories of "Jew" and "Gentile," old burdens of law and circumcision as the way to secure favour with God.

*No, no, no!!* Paul says.

Don't you see that everything has changed because of what God has accomplished in the person and work of Christ Jesus?

Don't you remember that no one is justified by keeping the law (Galatians 2:16)? Don't you remember that you are **all** children of God through faith, that there is no longer Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:26-28)?

Don't you realize that you are no longer rivals in a race for superiority or privilege but joint heirs according to the promise of God (Galatians 3:29)?

Why are you defaulting to these old patterns that have been abolished? Why are you defaulting to old power dynamics when Christ has made you equals?

Why are you defaulting to outward observances when it is faith *in* and the faithfulness *of* Christ that makes you accepted and clean?

Why are you charging headlong down these paths that have proven to be dead ends?

Why are you embracing this "gospel" which is really no gospel at all (Galatians 1:7)?

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Why indeed.

Now, it's relatively easy for us to shake our heads at those "foolish Galatians" who refused to get with the program.

But, as always, I think we have to ask of this text (as any text) the simple, yet vitally important question:

Does *this* story tell *our* story? If so, how?

I think it does, even if perhaps in more subtle ways than in first century Galatia.

The nature of the gospel itself may not be at stake for us as it was for them, but I think there is much we can learn from analyzing the structure of the problem and the argument.

For starters, the church in Galatia was defaulting to old identity markers to provide security.

I wonder if there are ways that we as Mennonites do this?

On Tuesday morning at men's coffee hour, the conversation turned briefly to the future of MC Canada.

This summer at our Assembly in Saskatoon there are difficult decisions to make. The Future Directions Task Force has put together a proposal that would involve the dissolution of Mennonite Church Canada and the transfer of leadership to local regional bodies. What exactly this might look like remains unclear (we'll be talking about this next Sunday during the SS hour, for those who want to learn more).

But there are questions. What might come next, we wonder? Everything is shifting and moving around and nothing feels stable and we are concerned about the institutions that we built and what will be left of them and how we will keep them going.

These are all legitimate concerns.

Our temptation is to default to the way we've always done things—this is *my* temptation! But these ways don't seem to be sustainable any more.

We don't have the congregational base to support institutions that were built by and for different generations in response to different needs and pressures. Old institutional models seem not to fit the present reality of the church in the twenty-first century.

And, in case we think this is all unique to us, I should note that these are challenges that are being wrestled with far beyond our Mennonite tradition—they are faced by our sisters and brothers in nearly every denomination.

There is pain in this. But I wonder... Could we all do with the reminder that God might be less concerned with our labels than we are?

Might this be a moment in history where God is inviting his church to cling less tightly to our denominational identities and move *toward* one another rather than marking out the boundaries between each other, useful and necessary as these might once have been?

I don't know. But I do know that whatever comes next, whatever we transition into, whatever God is calling us to as followers of Jesus in the Mennonite tradition, we could

probably use a reminder that through it all, we must always remember that our identities are grounded and rooted in Jesus—that we are part of a family of faith that no longer relies on the markers of identity that human beings naturally gravitate towards to separate “us” from “them?”

We could go down one level from the national church level to the local church level. Are there ways in which the “way things have always been” can be the default we cling to, even when this might not be the best or most useful or even most loving option?

This can be true in everything from how we make music together to how we arrange ourselves into committees to how we care for one another to how we tell stories or preach sermons.

One example: Many churches in the Anabaptist tradition are reevaluating the role of the Lord’s Supper. In recent history, Mennonites have celebrated the Lord’s Supper relatively infrequently—perhaps 4-6 times per year and often on “special” days like Pentecost or Maundy Thursday or First Advent.

But there is an increasing hunger among Christians for more practices that invite us into the mystery of Christ, that draw us back into the history and tradition of the ancient church. There’s a joke right going around right now in Winnipeg circles about how the fastest growing Mennonite church in the city is St. Margaret’s Anglican (or St. Benedict’s Table).

Some churches are asking questions of their defaults here and beginning to explore why doing it more frequently? Some are going to celebrating monthly, bi-weekly, even weekly.

This is just one example of how churches are looking at their defaults and trying to be open to reconfiguring things in response to how God is moving in and among his people.

What if we go down one level further yet? What about if we look at our individual lives and faith journeys?

Are there ways that patterns of faith and belief that were established in our earlier years have become unquestioned defaults rather than sources of life for ourselves and those around us?

Are there ways in which we fail to think creatively about what God might be calling us to? Are there ways in which we take the path of least resistance in how we think about God and neighbour?

Are there ways in which we cling to identity markers and “us-them” thinking, just like the church in Galatia? Are there ways in which we define ourselves as not like those “other” Christians, whether it’s “evangelicals” or “conservatives” or “liberals” or any of the other labels we use to mark ourselves out as the ones who are right over against the others who are wrong?

Are there ways that we revert back to old habits of trying to secure God’s favour through our own merits, whether this takes the shape of forced expressions of personal piety or burdens of relentless social activism or any of the countless other ways that we have as human beings to earn what has always been the free gift of God?

Whether it’s at the level of the national church or the local church or our own individual faith journeys, I think we all have our defaults.

They are easy to slide back into. They have familiarity on their side. We know what to expect from them. They give us imagined security. They prop up our identities. They reinforce our opinions.

They absolve us of doing the hard work of trying to put ourselves in the shoes of those who aren’t like us, those whose views or styles or practices we don’t like.

They require little of us when it comes to vulnerability or openness to surprise or possibility.

**They require little trust.**

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This is where I want to leave you this morning.

Because this journey of faith that we are a part of is *fundamentally* a relationship of **trust**. We are invited to trust God and not ourselves and all the ways that we attempt to secure for ourselves the things that we most need: identity, forgiveness, acceptance, love, hope.

**This was the fundamental problem of the Galatian church. They did not trust the new reality made possible by Jesus.**

They did not trust that there could really be such a thing as a new family of faith where all of the old certainties and rituals and practices and self-understandings that they clung to for meaning, identity, and security no longer held sway.

They did not trust that Christ was enough. And so, they defaulted to familiar patterns of us-them thinking, familiar reliance on the law, familiar measurements of who God's favourites were and were not.

They needed a reminder of who they were. Of *whose* they were.

One commentator I came across this week summarized it this way:

Paul's gospel message to the Galatians—the gospel that he received in a revelation from God—was not a proclamation of rules that would buy his churches entry into the family of God, **but a proclamation of what God has already accomplished in Jesus Christ and continues to accomplish today. Already the Galatians (and we) are enough. Because Christ Jesus is enough.**<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this is a reminder that we can all use, whether in first century Galatia or twenty-first-century Canada.

Christ Jesus is enough.

May God help us to default in the right ways. May God mold and shape us into people whose default settings are **love** for all people, regardless of tribe or tongue, **openness** to the future that God is leading his church into, and **trust** in the finished work of Christ Jesus

Amen.



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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2882](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2882)