

St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians is a message of freedom. The peoples of the world are longing for freedom. When so many religious peddlers are selling us alternative ideas which invariably lead us to bondage, it is heartwarming and even merciful that God should bring to us a fresh commentary on this book of freedom called Galatians. I trust no one more with this needed and most central message of the Gospel than my friend, Dr. Terry Johnson. Dr. Johnson's extensive pastoral work, his insights into the Word of God, his demonstrated leadership in preaching, teaching and living the message of the book of Galatians qualifies him as the man for the hour to write this great new commentary. I commend this new Christian Focus commentary by Dr. Johnson to all without hesitation

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I am grateful to Terry Johnson for providing the church with a faithful exposition of Galatians. The fact that Johnson has preached through Galatians gives this book the benefit of strong and insightful application. Johnson clearly explains some of the most difficult passages in Scripture, stalwartly defends evangelical doctrines such as "justification by faith alone," and also interacts with newer movements such as Federal Vision Theology and the New Perspective on Paul. This volume will be of help to any pastor or faithful Christian alike.

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Remarkably fresh, insightful and faithful to the gospel. Anyone seeking to mine the riches of this essential Pauline letter will benefit enormously from Terry Johnson's exposition. Teachers and preachers will especially be helped by this rich and balanced treatment of Galatians.

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Given current debates over the meaning of law, gospel and justification, a knowledge of Galatians has become essential. Johnson's commentary is essential reading for preachers and lay folk alike.

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Clear exposition, forceful exhortation, and brazen applications are the hallmarks of Terry Johnson's preaching. Pastor Johnson doesn't tell us about Galatians; he speaks God's Word to our hearts from Galatians.

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GALATIANS

A MENTOR EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

TERRY L. JOHNSON

MENTOR

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THE GRACE OF CHRIST

Galatians 1:1–5

Galatians is undoubtedly the most controversial, the most polemical, and the most personal of all of the New Testament books. Because of its vigorous defense of justification by faith and the Christian's freedom from the curse of the law, Galatians has been called the 'Magna Carta of Christian liberty.' Many of the church fathers wrote commentaries on it (e.g. Chrysostom, Augustine, Victorinus, and Jerome). James Montgomery Boice calls it 'the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation.'¹ Its influence upon Luther was particularly profound. His expositions of Galatians at the University of Wittenburg, begun on October 27, 1516, preceded the publishing of the *Ninety-Five Thesis* which launched the Reformation by one year almost to the day (October 31, 1517). Luther's commentary on it, published in 1519, exerted enormous influence then and repeatedly since. Charles Wesley and others during the Great Awakening were converted while reading it. Luther said of Galatians, 'I am wedded to it,' calling it his 'Katie von Bora.'

Why is it so important? Because in the context of a direct challenge by legalists, the Apostle Paul defends the gospel against the encroachments of its most persistent enemy, the religion of merit.

Nowhere in the Bible is it clearer that one can only be saved through faith alone in Christ alone apart from works. Galatians is from beginning to end dealing with the answer to the question, 'What must I do to be saved?' Given that all of us must one day die and stand before God, there can be no more important question, and none on behalf of which we ought to exert ourselves to be sure that we have answered it correctly.

BACKGROUND

We must begin by looking at the background to this epistle. What issues were the occasion of its writing? The basic issue was *the relation between law and justification*. Around AD 50 the church faced its first doctrinal crisis. More and more the gospel was taking root in Gentile communities around the Mediterranean. As these non-Jews came to believe in Christ and enter what heretofore had been largely a Jewish Christian church, the question naturally arose regarding their relation to customs and traditions of Judaism. Would Gentile believers be required to keep the Law of Moses, particularly its ceremonial aspects, in order to be Christians? The defining issue was circumcision. Some were teaching, as Luke reports, that 'unless you are circumcised

according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved' (Acts 15:1). Another important question was that of ceremonial cleanliness (2:11 ff.). Could Jewish and Gentile Christians enjoy table fellowship together? Could they share a meal, or would a practicing Jew (though now a Christian) be contaminated by contact with Gentiles, as Jewish traditions taught? Apparently the issue of observing the Jewish sacred calendar also was raised (4:10). 'In short,' says Lightfoot, 'nothing less than submission to the whole ceremonial law seems to have been contemplated by the innovators.'² Thus both the unity of the church and the graciousness of the gospel were being threatened. The 'Judaizers,' as they came to be called, were insisting that the Gentile believers also perform the ceremonial rites and observe the religious festivals of Judaism, and be, in effect, practicing Jews as well as Christians. Membership in the community of God's people as well as salvation itself were said to depend upon it.

Please note that no one was denying that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah. No one was denying that Jesus had been raised from the grave. No one was denying that His commands must be obeyed. No one was denying that He must be believed in if one is to be saved. This was affirmed by all. Indeed the manner in which the Apostle Paul contrasts his call to be an apostle as being 'not sent from men...but through Jesus Christ,' implying as it does that Jesus stands on God's side of the line that separates God and man, assumes agreement even at this point. As Machen points out, 'even the Judaizers, so far as we can see, had no quarrel with the Apostle Paul's lofty view of Christ.' Paul, he notes, 'does not argue about it,' and 'seems to be under no necessity whatever of defending it against attack within the Church.'³ But they were adding to Christ these ceremonial ordinances as necessary, at least, if mutual fellow-

ship between Jews and Gentiles was to be enjoyed, and probably for salvation as well. As Bruce summarizes, 'even if they demand only a token measure of law-keeping from the Galatians, any such demand involves acceptance of the principle of justification by works of the law.'⁴

The second issue was *the apostleship of Paul*. More clearly and more forcefully than anyone else, the Apostle was teaching that Gentile Christians were free from the ceremonial requirements of Mosaic Law. Consequently, along with this attack on the gospel came an attack on the chief emissary of that gospel, the Apostle Paul himself. It is easy enough to see how the two are related. The Apostle Paul was watering down the gospel, they were saying. He was altering the gospel as the Twelve had preached it in order to make it more appealing to Gentiles. Consequently, they denied that he was authorized to preach such a message. They denied that he was a true apostle at all. Whatever authority he had, they may have said, it was less than that of the Twelve who, in fact, disapproved of his departure from Jewish ancestral traditions. Thus there was a two pronged attack: one against the message, one against the messenger. One denies the sufficiency of grace; the other denies the authority of the Apostle Paul. On these two fronts, Paul will counterattack.

Amongst whom and when were these issues swirling? The Apostle addresses himself to 'the churches of Galatia' (v. 2). Who are they? The term 'Galatia,' can be used to refer to two separate regions in present day Asia Minor or Turkey. The scholars debate whether or not it indicates 'northern' or 'southern' Galatia. The former was the homeland of a migratory Celtic people who also settled in present day France (and later Britain) and were called 'Gauls,' and came to be distinguished from the West-European Gauls

by the term 'Gallo-Graecians,' from which the term 'Galatians' was derived. Or it could refer to the 'southern' Galatian region which carried the Roman provincial name of 'Galatia,' and included such cities as Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium, that is, major cities of the empire to which Paul was inclined to visit, and indeed did visit, as we read in Acts 13 and 14. Most modern scholars take the latter view though the matter cannot be resolved with certainty. Whichever is the case, Paul himself had brought the gospel of grace to the 'churches of Galatia.' He was, in some respects, their 'founding pastor.' He refers in 4:13 ff. to a 'bodily illness' of an especially repulsive nature which detained him in Galatia, leading to his ministry among them. They responded to his proclamation as though Paul were 'an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself.' He had a deep affection for them. Consequently, when they began to listen to the Judaizers, he reacted with righteous indignation. 'You foolish Galatians,' he says, 'who has bewitched you?' 'I fear for you,' he complains, 'that perhaps I have labored over you in vain.' 'Would that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves' (3:1; 4:11; 5:12). The Apostle sees in their changing views a supreme crisis for the church, one which is undermining the gospel itself. About this he is clear and dogmatic. Those who add works to grace preach 'a different gospel,' they 'distort the gospel of Christ,' and are 'accursed' (1:6-9).

It is difficult to date the precise time of writing. It is fairly certain that it lies between the eve of the Jerusalem Council described in Acts 15, usually dated at AD 48-49, and the Apostle Paul's imprisonment recorded in Acts 21, approximately AD 58. Paul's lengthy stay in Ephesus, about AD 52, is often cited as a likely possibility. F. F. Bruce and R. Y. K. Fung argue for the earlier date. It is typically regarded as the earliest of the

New Testament books, indeed the earliest extant Christian document, and therefore provides us with our first glimpse of the primitive church.

Finally, we may broadly outline the epistle as follows.

- 1:1-10 Salutation and Introduction of Issues
- 1:11-2:21 Defense of Paul's Apostleship
- 3:1-5:12 Defense of the Gospel
- 5:13-6:10 Practical Exhortations

PAUL'S APOSTLESHIP

Paul begins with an introductory defense of his apostleship.

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men, nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised Him from the dead). (Gal. 1:1)

This unusual introduction shows Paul's understanding of the *importance of the issues*.

Let us remember that the Apostle Paul is one of the primary authors of the New Testament. He was once a violent persecutor of the church, but was dramatically converted on the Damascus road, was called by Christ to be an apostle, and went on to be the greatest missionary in the history of the Christian Church. Paul's introduction contains all of the usual elements found in the letters of antiquity and his letters to the other churches: the writer's name, the name of those to whom the letter is written, and an expression of good wishes ('grace and peace'). But unlike his other letters, there is no expression of praise for the Galatian churches. Instead, he plunges directly into the matters of concern which will be addressed throughout the letter. Immediately he defends his apostleship and his gospel from those who had attacked it. I am 'Paul,' he says, 'an apostle (not sent from men, nor

through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ, and God the Father.' Compare this, for example with the opening lines of Philippians:

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now. (Phil. 1:1-5)

The tone is entirely different. He is obviously pleased with the Philippian believers. He has deep affection for them. His thanksgiving overflows. There is a complete absence of the defensiveness of Galatians, even as Galatians is devoid of the affectionate and thankful tone of Philippians. Listen to him again with the Ephesians:

For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which exists among you, and your love for all the saints, do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention of you in my prayers. (Eph. 1:15-16)

Similarly he says to the Colossians:

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the saints and faithful brethren in Christ who are at Colossae: grace to you and peace from God our Father. We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and the love which you have for all the saints. (Col. 1:1-4)

With both the Ephesians and the Colossians, he identifies himself, his readers, offers grace and

peace, as in all his correspondence. But then he overflows with thanksgiving and praise for them. The same is true for Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, and 1 & 2 Thessalonians. But, uniquely, in the letter to the Galatians, there is an urgency that is missing in all the rest of letters. He foregoes the niceties. He gets right down to business. He is urgent, even indignant, and he will not be deflected even for a moment from his task of defending the gospel from those who threaten it. This means initially that he must defend his authority to preach his gospel. This is not personal defensiveness on his part. He defends himself because it is crucial to his defense of the gospel itself. If he is discredited, his gospel is discredited.

In what sense could he claim to be an 'apostle'? An 'apostle,' in the non-technical sense, means a 'sent one,' a messenger, a missionary (Acts 14:14; Rom. 16:7; Luke 11:49; 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25). But it is also used in the New Testament in a restrictive sense, designating a special office in the Christian church. The 'Apostles' were those set apart by Christ for the purpose of building the foundation of the church. The first chapter of Acts lays down two requirements for apostles: that they had been eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus from the time of His baptism by John, including the resurrection, and that they had been chosen for the office by the risen Lord Himself. These criteria were fulfilled by the original Twelve and others who may have joined their ranks, including Barnabas, James, and Silvanus (1 Cor. 15:7; 1 Thess. 2:7). But the Apostle Paul obviously did not. He is an exception in this, and many other ways. He had not been a witness of Jesus' earthly ministry. As Boice points out, 'undoubtedly he considered his Damascus experience to be the equivalent of this.'⁵ He had witnessed Christ and been called

by Him only after the resurrection. Yet this was more than enough. No man or group of men had called him to be an apostle. Not even the apostles had asked him to be an apostle. 'Paul, an apostle,' he says, '(not sent from men nor through the agency of men, but through Jesus Christ).' His call was a divine call. His gospel, consequently, was a divine gospel. 'Am I not an apostle?' he will later ask. 'Have I not *seen* the Lord?' (1 Cor. 9:1). We should note that the apostles' authority came to them directly from Christ. It was not given to them by the church. The church was subject to them, not they to the church. The church did not commission them, rather they, through the gospel that Christ gave to them, called the church into existence.

So Paul makes this initial point. He just touches on it in the salutation. He will spend the rest of the first and second chapters elaborating the point. But from the outset he lets them know that he is on to them and defends the legitimacy of his apostleship.

PAUL'S GOSPEL

And all the brethren who are with me, to the churches of Galatia. (Gal. 1:2)

Now Paul begins to introduce his defense of his gospel. First, he *appeals to the brethren*. He does not name who the 'brethren' are who are with him, as he does in his other letters. This may be, as Boice guesses, because he does not want 'to give the impression that his gospel requires additional support.'⁶ At the same time, he cites the brethren in order to remind the Galatians that his message was more than a 'Pauline oddity,' but was indeed 'the received doctrine of all the Christian church and its missionaries.'⁷ He writes to the 'churches' or 'congregations' of Galatia

(*ekklesiai*). Note that first century Christianity assumes that the churches have a collective identity. It is generally recognized that *ekklesia* 'refers primarily to the entire community of believers and only secondarily to the community of believers living in a specific area,' says Fung. 'A corollary of this truth,' he goes on to say, 'is that the Church as the total community is not a mere aggregate of individual congregations; rather the local church is the universal Church in its local manifestation.'⁸ The universal or catholic church, what Paul calls 'the church of God' (v. 13), is understood in the New Testament to be divided into local churches, or congregations. The Christian churches in a given region could be referred to collectively by either the plural ('churches') or the singular ('the church'). John Stott sees in this usage 'some biblical warrant for the concept of a regional church, the federation of local churches in a particular area.'⁹

Second, he reminds them of *grace and peace*, the essential elements of the gospel.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Gal. 1:3)

'Grace' is the unmerited favor of God to us in Christ Jesus. 'Peace' is the state of well-being we are brought to in our relationship with God, with others, and within our own hearts. These are God's gifts to us.

Third, he *summarizes the message of the cross*.

Who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us out of this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father. (Gal. 1:4)

Already the Apostle Paul has mentioned the doctrines of God and Christ, and the reality of the resurrection, grace, and peace. Now he

affirms the substitutionary nature of Christ's atonement. Notice the emphasis on the sovereign will of God, implicitly contrasted with the part played by man as imagined by the Judaizers. Christ 'gave Himself for (*hyper*, 'because of' or 'on behalf of') our sins,' he says, 'that *He* might deliver us...according to the *will of our God and Father*.' As Boice comments, 'It is hard to imagine a statement better calculated to oppose any intrusion of the will or supposed merits of man in the matter of attaining salvation.'¹⁰ 'He' delivers us according to His 'will.' He died as our substitute, on our behalf, in our place. He became 'a curse for (*hyper* again) us' (3:13). The message of the cross is packed here in Paul's greeting because he wanted to make the point quickly and firmly. Salvation is the result of God's work, not man's. God willed it, He sent His Son to accomplish it, and by His Spirit He applies it, giving us grace and peace, resulting in our deliverance 'out of this present evil age.' This is the same 'age' to which we are not to be conformed in Romans 12:2. The gospel is a 'rescue' (NEB). The same word is used of Peter's rescue from prison and of Paul's from a lynch mob (Acts 12:11; 23:27). His point is that Christ has set them free, and so they are not to return to the bondage of works religion.

Fourth, he *underscores the great purpose of the gospel*.

To whom be the glory forevermore. Amen. (Gal. 1:5)

Doxologies are not ordinarily found in the Apostle's introduction. He places one here in order to emphasize the great end which the doctrines of grace serve. It is not to honor man's will and man's works. The gospel of salvation by grace gives all the glory to God.

Thus in these four ways, the Apostle Paul begins the debate even before he completes his

salutation. He is so eager to defend the gospel that he's arguing on the envelope. Let's ask ourselves again about why Paul is so urgent. We begin to answer our question when we ask, 'Who is Paul?' The Apostle Paul is the man of all men who knew the insidious, self-deceiving power of self-righteousness. If ever anyone might have succeeded in saving himself through works, it was he. Paul was born in Tarsus, the capital of Cilicia, the son of Jewish ex-patriots. Paul's father was a Roman citizen making Paul a Roman citizen by birth (Acts 22:28). Since they were Roman citizens, his family was likely to be a leading family and, indeed, were substantial enough to send Paul to Jerusalem to be trained. Further, his was a religious family belonging to the strictest sect of Judaism, the Pharisees (Acts 23:6). Because he was reared in a Gentile city, Paul grew up speaking not only the Greek of Tarsus but the Aramaic of Palestine. His training in Jerusalem was under the famed Gamaliel, the leading rabbi of his time. The picture that emerges from the New Testament of Paul's pre-conversion life is that of a sincere, devout, zealous practitioner of first century Judaism. He was, by his own testimony,

Circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the law, found blameless. (Phil. 3:5-6)

Paul was an admirable man, even exemplary in many respects. He was a man of impeccable moral character. His religious practice was one of exceptional devotion. No doubt he was always present in worship services, he tithed his money, and he practiced charity. We would have admired and honored the man if we had known him.

If ever a man might have been saved through moral and religious conduct, it was Paul. How many of us can say that we are *blameless* in relation to the requirements of the law? How many of us, in a day of religious zealotry like his, could claim to have advanced beyond our contemporaries '*being more extremely zealous*' for our religious practices than the rest (Gal. 1:14)?

But of what use was his self-attained righteousness? He acknowledges that he had more of a moral leg to stand on than others.

Although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I have far more. (Phil. 3:4)

He was a Hebrew! A Pharisee! Blameless! Of what value was it?

But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ. (Phil. 3:7-8)

What counts is being 'found in Him.'

And may be found in Him, not having righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith. (Phil. 3:9)

For Paul to be saved, grace had to overcome monumental barriers to the gospel. It had to overcome his self-righteousness, spiritual pride, and works-based confidence in his good standing with God. It had to overcome his violent hostility

to Jesus and his followers. Paul was not just indifferent or uncaring. Neither was he one who is simply ignorant of the truth. He was a ferocious opponent and, humanly speaking, the least likely candidate for conversion in all the world.

Consequently, the Apostle Paul knew what the grace of God was and what it wasn't. He knew the insidiousness of any theology which would reintroduce works as necessary for salvation. He knew how subtle self-righteousness could be, and how blinding.

Is this remote for us today? It is true, we are not dealing with Phariseism. It's true, we're not battling Judaizers. But do we still struggle with a false gospel of self-righteousness? Are our churches still filled today, nearly 2,000 years after Paul wrote this letter, with those who think that salvation is achieved through human merit? I'm afraid the answer to that question is, 'Yes.' Even today, in the popular mind, it is thought that going to heaven is just a matter of being nice. Typically it is said that just so a person is sincere, just so they do good, just so one tries hard, just so one doesn't hurt anybody else, that's all that matters. These sentiments may sound benign, but they, in fact, shift the ground of our salvation from the grace of Christ to human merit. They undermine the gospel and turn it into a works religion, just like all the rest. They destroy the grace of Christ.

Beyond what we might identify as the widespread thinking of the person in the pew, there are theological challenges to the gospel today arising from the most surprising places. Among conservative Presbyterians there is the 'Federal Vision,' reformulating the doctrine of justification so as to accommodate a greater role for covenant obedience in salvation. Among evangelical scholars the 'New Perspective' theologians (e.g. E. P. Sanders; N. T. Wright; J. D. G. Dunn) are also



Galatians 1:1–5

redefining the Pauline doctrine of justification so as to underscore its corporate dimension, namely membership in the covenant community as the key to a right relationship with God. As unbelievable as it may seem nearly 500 years after the Reformation, the personal, forensic,

imputational dimensions of justification are at risk. Today it is as important as it was 2,000 years ago that we understand the gracious nature of Christ's gospel, lest we find ourselves without a gospel to preach. No one will help us more to do so than Paul in this letter to the Galatians.

NO OTHER GOSPEL

Galatians 1:6–10

It is only with great difficulty that we can convince anyone these days that what one believes matters. It is universally acknowledged that it is important *that* one believe. But the content of one's faith, *what* one believes, is largely assumed to be a secondary matter, if it has any importance at all. For example, if I were to describe an individual as a moral man, a religious man, a wonderful father and husband, an exemplary employer in the treatment of his employees, one who lives the golden rule, who loves his neighbor, who helps the poor, who gives generously to charities, and so on, and then lament that he rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and so was headed for hell and would surely end up there if he didn't change his views, I dare say that even in our church among our Sunday morning congregation, there would be a great outcry and some would turn away in disgust. Why? Because we assume that what we believe is virtually irrelevant so long as we do believe. Denominational or doctrinal differences are unimportant. What matters is the presence of true faith, sincerity, and consistency between what we believe and what we practice, whatever that belief might be. The details of doctrine are secondary. It is inconceivable to us that

one who was so devout, so sincere, so kind, so loving could be lost. We have a strong bias and therefore distorted preference for practical matters, how one lives, how one treats others. The terms 'doctrine,' 'dogma,' and 'dogmatics' all have a pejorative sense these days.

This diminishing of the importance of the contents of one's beliefs cannot be squared with what the Bible says. We would not for a moment deny that practice is vital. But we do wish to assert that what we *think* is every bit as vital as what we *experience*. What one believes is of critical, even eternal importance. The content of one's theology must be fundamentally correct or one is lost. Deny an essential of the Christian faith, and there is no hope of salvation. Sound tough? This is exactly what Paul teaches in Galatians 1:6–10.

NO OTHER GOSPEL

First, there is but one gospel.

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel. (Gal. 1:6)

The Apostle Paul is 'amazed,' or 'astonished,' at what is taking place among the Galatians. As the

founding pastor of their churches, he had taught them of the ‘grace of Christ.’ They had known and received the truth. Yet they were turning from the truth, a circumstance that clearly causes the Apostle considerable pain. The statement that they had turned ‘quickly’ from Christ recalls some Old Testament language directed at Israel’s apostasies (e.g. Exod. 32:8; Judg. 2:17). The word translated ‘deserting’ (*metatethemi*) has in the middle form, says Longenecker, the special sense of ‘change over,’ ‘turn away from,’ ‘fall away,’ ‘desert,’ and ‘become apostate.’ In the world of Greek philosophy it was used to refer to one who left one school of thought for another. Used in the present tense, it indicates that the apostasy of the Galatians was in process. ‘They were,’ says Burton, ‘on the point, or more exactly, in the very act, of turning.’¹¹ This is confirmed by 4:9–10 and 5:2–4 as well. Remarkably, they were turning away from God Himself, ‘Him who called you by the grace of Christ,’ in their zeal to be more religious. They were turning to a ‘different gospel,’ and repeating the apostasies of old Israel. Notice, to turn away from the biblical gospel is to turn away from God. It is not just a matter of adopting a new theology. Theology and Christian experience cannot be separated. To turn away from the gospel of grace is to turn away from the God of grace. This ‘gospel,’ he says,

...is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. (Gal. 1:7)

This ‘different gospel’ is not ‘another’ gospel, he says. If the new preachers were claiming that their work was merely ‘in addition to,’ and complimentary of Paul’s teaching, Paul emphat-

ically denies it. It is ‘different’ (*hetero*), meaning ‘of a different kind,’ and not merely ‘another’ (*allo*), meaning ‘another of the same kind.’ He did not consider it to be the same with slight differences. Because they were denying the graciousness of the gospel, their teaching could not be called a ‘gospel.’ These preachers were ‘disturbing,’ or ‘confusing,’ them by calling the new teaching a ‘gospel.’ But this was fundamentally dishonest of them. The verbs are in the present tense indicating ‘that these errorists were still in Galatia when Paul was writing this letter, and that he wrote with the intention of stopping them in the very midst of their activities.’ The Judaizers were seeking to ‘distort,’ or ‘pervert,’ the gospel, a political term (*metastrepho*), says Longenecker, ‘having revolutionary action particularly in view.’¹²

What terrible thing were they teaching? Were they denying the resurrection of Christ? No. Were they denying His deity? No. Were they denying that He was the Messiah and Savior? No. Were they denying the necessity of faith in Him? No. As we saw last time, they merely denied that faith was enough. They added to faith in Christ meritorious work of the Law. That’s all. No big deal, one might say.

What is implied in this? That there is but one gospel of grace. It is the one which was originally taught by Paul and the apostles. It is unchanging. It cannot be revised. It cannot be modernized. It cannot be added to. It cannot be improved. If it is altered, it is lost. Any ‘different gospel’ is not a gospel at all. It cannot be changed without being distorted. The gospel which they and we are to believe is the one which was originally preached to them (v. 8), and which, as he tells them, ‘you received’ (v. 9). Our gospel is fixed in its content. It described as a deposit, or

'treasure,' a 'standard of sound words' with which we have been entrusted and which we must guard (1 Tim. 6:20–21; 2 Tim. 1:13–14). What is the gospel? It is the teaching of 'the grace of Christ.' The gospel 'of Christ' is the gospel which has Christ as both its content ('about Christ') and its source ('from Christ'). It is a gospel of 'grace,' meaning that salvation is not merited or earned by works but given as a gift through faith alone. This gospel was 'once for all delivered to the saints,' and we are to 'contend earnestly' for it (Jude 3).

If only the church had learned this lesson! We would have had no *Book of Mormon*, no revelations of Ellen White, no Mary Baker Eddy's *Key to Science and Scripture*, no extra-biblical traditions upon which to base the practice and doctrines of the church. Our gospel is fixed. It is not to be added to or subtracted from. Our responsibility is to faithfully preach it and to pass it on to the next generation. That doesn't sound very glamorous. We tend to have a certain pride in our creative abilities. We want to revise and reinterpret it for our generation. Often we wish to do so for the best of reasons. Indeed the case can be made that virtually every heresy introduced to the Christian church has been done so in the name of the high motive of evangelism. The Arians wanted to simplify the gospel, so they denied the deity of Christ. The Pelagians wanted to purify the practice of the gospel, so they denied the sovereignty of God and let everything rest on the will of man. Schleiermacher, the father of modern theological liberalism, wanted to commend the gospel to 'its cultured despisers,' so he emptied it of its historical, supernatural, and theological content, which apparently offended enlightened minds, and gave it an entirely

subjective reinterpretation. The early Unitarians wanted to liberate the gospel from its alleged Greek rationalism, and so denied the doctrine of the Trinity. The Judaizers were doing much the same sort of thing. They wanted to make the gospel more palatable for a Jewish audience. Jews were inclined to take offense at an adaptation of Judaism (as they saw it) that removed the ceremonial aspects. So the Judaizers put them back in order to appease and appeal to Jews. They wished to avoid the persecution that arises from the offense of the cross (Gal. 6:12; cf. 5:11). No doubt the same thing is being done today. Modern ears don't like the sound of the judgment side of the gospel so doctrines of sin, atonement, and the cross get neglected or reinterpreted in terms of finding self-fulfillment, or peace, or prosperity. Christ the Savior from sin becomes Christ the Key to success. Christ the 'Holy One' becomes Christ the 'friendly One.' Christ the Judge who commands all men everywhere to repent becomes Christ the Therapist who invites all men everywhere to feel good about themselves. This is undeniably how the gospel is being preached today. Is this the gospel of the grace of Christ? We doubt it.

How often the church has been disturbed and divided because it has violated this principle. As Stott points out, 'to tamper with the gospel is always to trouble the Church...Indeed, the Church's greatest troublemakers (now as then) are not those outside who oppose, ridicule and persecute it, but those inside who try to change the gospel.'¹³ It cannot be changed without being lost in the process.

Ironically, it doesn't need to be changed. This is what is so remarkable about the revisionists. It doesn't need to be revised for the sake of modern

ears anymore than for ancient ears. It is still the ‘power of God for salvation’ (Rom. 1:16). Even in apostolic times Paul had to warn:

For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths. (2 Tim. 4:3–4)

One might argue that people today don’t like to hear about sin, judgment, blood atonement at the cross, repentance and faith, and so on. But the fact is, they never did like it. When did the natural man begin to like to be told that he needs a Savior? He likes to think of himself as self-sufficient. He thinks that he is fine the way he is, even virtuous. He resents being told that he isn’t. A sinner? Needs saving? Must repent and turn to Christ? Can’t be left alone to do whatever he pleases? Of course he doesn’t like to hear these things. This has always been the case. So what are we to do? Tickle his ears? Say what he wants to hear? Provide him with entertainment and nice talks? Paul knew the temptation and the answer. He told the Corinthians, who, by the way, wanted him to spiff-up the gospel so that it would appeal to philosophy loving Greek culture, that,

I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. (1 Cor. 2:2)

Far from sugar-coating his message or repackaging his presentation he says,

And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom,

but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:3–5)

Should Paul adapt the gospel to the desires of the Judaizers? Should he alter it to accommodate the interests of the Greeks? Should he tone down Christian moral teaching when speaking to the libertines? When it comes to non-essentials he will go far in accommodating them. But compromise the simplicity and graciousness of the gospel itself? Never!

NO OTHER WAY

Perhaps at this point someone might not be getting the implications of what the Apostle Paul says. He might be thinking, ‘Okay, it’s not the gospel of grace, but it’s another valid expression of faith. It might do some good, too. It exalts Christ. It affirms the resurrection. It teaches the necessity of faith. Those who have adopted the Judaizer’s message are good people. They are moral, fine family men, and generous. It’s not the best, but it will benefit some.’ So the Apostle goes beyond this. He goes on to say,

But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:8)

The Apostle Paul sees antithesis between His message and that of the Judaizers, where the Galatians were probably seeing compliment. He uses a strong adversative, *alla* (‘but’) with *kai* (‘even’), ‘signaling the extreme nature of the supposition to follow,’ says Longenecker.¹⁴ Here he identifies his ultimate concern. It is not his apostolic authority, though that is important

and he defends it. But by including himself in this theoretical anathema, he clarifies that the graciousness of the gospel is all important, not his status. 'But even though *we*...should preach to you a gospel contrary...' Not even he could alter the gospel as Christ had given it. 'So disinterested is Paul's zeal for the gospel,' says Stott, 'that he even desires the curse of God to fall upon *himself*, should he be guilty of perverting it.'²⁵ Indeed, if 'an angel from heaven' should preach another gospel it was not to be received. Satan, after all, can disguise Himself as an 'angel of light' (2 Cor. 11:14-15). Not even a heavenly messenger is to be received or believed if he brings a contrary message.

It is likely that the Judaizers were claiming authorization for their changes from the Jerusalem church. They probably claimed to have the support of the Twelve (see 2:6-14). By appealing to the angels, so to speak, Paul makes any reference to credentials irrelevant if the focus or content of the gospel is being altered. Paul is in effect saying, 'It doesn't matter who they are or where they are from; if they change the gospel, they are 'accused.'" The Greek term *anathema*, means to deliver over to the wrath of God for destruction.

'Missed what I said?' Paul repeats himself:

As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:9)

'As we have said before,' probably refers to a previous visit to the churches. If anyone preaches a gospel that differs from that which they had previously 'received,' he falls under the judicial wrath of God. The shift from the subjunctive in verse 8 ('should preach'), to the

indicative in verse 9 ('is preaching'), stresses the immediacy of the situation.

Is this curse contrary to the spirit of Christ? Some have argued that it is. If it is, we must face the fact that it is emphatic, deliberate and twice repeated. But in reality, that it is not. Jesus Himself said,

And whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea. (Mark 9:42)

Why must these things be stated in such extreme terms by both Paul and Jesus? Because those who obscure the gospel threaten the eternal destiny of those whom they confuse. We, after all, are not talking about taking a loss on the stock market. We're not talking about losing a track meet. We're not even talking about activities that threaten the lives of people. This has to do with eternal life and damnation. If one were teaching dietary habits that purported to extend life, but in fact resulted in shaving years off the life span of their practitioners, it would be serious enough. But this has to do with the gaining or losing of one's own soul, in comparison with which even gaining the whole world is insignificant. Consequently the strongest language and strongest measures must be taken.

Does this ring true to modern ears? Probably not. Religious and moral relativism is so deeply ingrained today that anyone who says such things is seen as a bigot, at best, and probably a nut. But we might pause to point out the inconsistency. You say that all is relative, but you buy music as though there were criteria by which one might distinguish the good from the bad. You say that there are no absolutes, and yet you talk as though

there were transcendent, universal values such as love and justice, and are quick to denounce what you see as unloving and unjust behavior. If we were to stand on the top of a ten-story building you would acknowledge absolutely the relevance of the laws of gravity. If we were to plunge down deep into the ocean you would entrust your life to engineers who designed an underwater vessel in conformity with the 'laws of nature.' At none of these points would you say, 'The laws of gravity may be true for you but they are not for me,' or 'For me water is the same as air,' or 'For me love and justice can mean hurting innocent people.' No, we all live as though there were universal criteria by which to distinguish types of behavior and by which to live our lives. There are absolutes, if you will. Why should we be surprised to find that the same is true in matters religious? If there is one God, and most will grant this, then there is one truth. One God means one final reality. God is. God is what He is. He is not what He isn't. Therefore all opinions about God cannot be equally valid. Religions cannot say mutually exclusive things about God, as indeed they do, and all be true. It is intellectually dishonest to say that they are all just saying the same thing, when indeed they are saying opposite things. If Jesus Christ is the Prophet of God, then what He says is true and that which contradicts Him is false. If Jesus Christ is the Son of God and God the Son, then what he says, being a revelation of the One true God, is universally true and binding upon humanity. What He does is absolutely unique and universally relevant, that is, relevant for all peoples, and all places, and all times. When He says, 'No one comes to the Father but by Me,' we better pay attention.

It is so much easier to be a relativist. One will have a better time socially if one will say that

sincerity is all that matters, and the differences among the religions of the world are external only and largely irrelevant. Everyone will appreciate one's magnanimous spirit if one can agree that we are all on different paths leading to the same mountaintop, that we all worship the same God. There's just one problem with it. It's not true. It doesn't conform to reality. Paul's view of Christ and the Judaizers view cannot both be right. And according to the Bible, your eternal salvation rests on *getting it right*. The Muslim view of Christ and the biblical view cannot both be right. The Hindu view of Christ and the Christian view cannot both be right. One cannot have whatever view of Christ one wishes and be right any more than one can have whatever view of gravity which one wishes and be right. One might counter, 'I don't think that so much should rest on theological or religious views.' The answer is, it doesn't matter what you or I think. It does matter if God says it does. God is. Christ is. This is reality. Gravity applies whether you believe it or not. The One, True, and Living God has spoken and acted through His Son. He sent Him to the cross to bear the sins of the world, and that event is universally and eternally significant. His call goes out to the world through Him. And He is not giving other alternatives, much as modern pluralism wishes that God would conform to its expectations.

These are uncomfortable things to say. Yet the church must say them in this age and in every age if it is to be faithful to the gospel and continue to have a gospel to preach. Paul is driving at this in the last verse of our section,

For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God?
Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying
to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of
Christ. (Gal. 1:10)



No Other Gospel

Paul seems to have been accused of trimming his message, preaching half a gospel, in order to secure a popular response. They said that he was a 'man-pleaser' (see 1 Cor. 10:33; 1 Thess. 2:4-5). In fact the opposite was the case. Paul's strong language proves that he is no flatterer. He is not against pleasing others per se, but against pleasing them for the sake of one's own advantage. He is willing to be 'all things to all men' when it comes to matters of culture and taste (1 Cor. 9:19-23). But he does not teach and preach as one whose

main concern is to please others. One cannot truly be a servant of Christ and do so, and neither can we.

David Wells says that evangelicals have, in the words of the title of his acclaimed book, *No Place For Truth*. Even we are awash in a sea of subjectivity and relativism. But our responsibility is clear. Truth matters. What we think counts forever. The gospel of grace of Christ must be proclaimed and protected, against the world, and for the world.