

The Good News of Christian Freedom: A Study of Galatians

Session 1: "The Gospel in Crisis"

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Galatians – one of the earliest documents of the New Testament

Foundational summary of the gospel

Book has been beloved throughout the centuries

Influenced many prominent theologians – Augustine, Martin Luther, Thomas Aquinas

Luther *"The Epistle to the Galatians is my epistle, to which I have wedded myself."*

Galatians – written between 46 A.D. and 61 A.D.; probably in the mid 50s (two decades after Christ)

Genre: Letter (Epistle); this is the primary genre in New Testament

Galatians – letter written by the Apostle Paul

None of Paul's letters are more passionate, urgent, or angrier in tone than this letter.

John Chrysostom: *"Now that this Epistle breathes an indignant spirit, is obvious to every one on the first perusal ..."*

Timothy George: *"From beginning to end, its six chapters of 149 verses bristle with passion, sarcasm, and anger. True, there is the touch of tenderness... though this was the tearing tenderness of a distraught mother who must endure all over again the pains of childbirth because her children, who should have known better, were in danger of committing spiritual suicide."*

This letter was meant to be read publicly.

Paul typically follows the ancient letter writing convention - introduces himself, names who he is writing to, benediction, greeting, giving thanks, and says kind things and recognizes what God is doing in their midst. (I Corinthians, Philippians, I Thess.)

But Galatians is shocking! Paul introduces himself and gives a benediction. But then the tone changes.

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel." (1:6)

No "thanks" here; calls them "traitors!"

(3:1) "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?"

(4:9) "... whose slaves you want to be once more."

(4:11) "I am afraid that I may have labored over you in vain." (Paul first brought the gospel to these churches.)

(4:19) "I am in despair about you"

Why is Paul so upset? What is the crisis?

(1:6) Galatians are turning from Christ. Turning to a different (and false) gospel.

Other leaders (in Paul's absence) have told these Greek Christians that in order to be saved they must adopt all these Jewish laws and customs. They are saying this is the true gospel.

Paul doesn't just disagree. Paul thinks the message of these teachers is a DENIAL OF THE GOSPEL ITSELF. Paul is clarifying what the Good News is. He denounces a dangerous rival message.

Why is this still important now? We still live in a world of rival gospels and gospel distortions. The New Testament often warns about how easy it is to be led astray from the liberating and life-giving teaching of Jesus. How easy the gospel can be changed subtly. It is easy to put your hope and trust in other kinds of messages or promises or visions that can tempt us to abandon the gospel.

Paul makes three major points about how the TRUE gospel is different from “rival” gospels.
This is covered in the section from 1:11-2:14
Paul tells his own story and relates this to the gospel itself.

POINT #1 : THE TRUE GOSPEL COMES FROM GOD

Galatians 1:11-12

“For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man’s gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Paul puts great emphasis that the message he has been given doesn’t come from a human authority. Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), blinded him, and revealed himself to him. Christ, by the Spirit, taught him. The message he has been given comes directly from God.

Important – we look to many sources to find answers to questions that are most pressing in moments of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. What message or truth are we searching for?

Paul says the message he has is NOT a result of research or the wise sayings of a sage. It is NOT secret insider information. His message comes from the revelation of God himself.

POINT #2 : THE TRUE GOSPEL IS IN AGREEMENT WITH APOSTOLIC TEACHING

Galatians 2:9

“... when James and Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given to me, they gave the right hand of fellowship to Barnabas and me.”

Paul traveled to Jerusalem to meet with the other apostles

Paul doesn’t think that he needs their approval

But it is important for Paul to communicate to the Galatians that he is received by the other apostles and that they agree together. They share the same message.

The word for “heresy” in Greek refers to a certain “sect” that follows the teaching. Connotation – group of people that chose to follow a teaching that departs from the rest of the group. Many of these in the early church. (e.g. Gnosticism, Marcionism, Arianism, Pelagianism)

Is there heresy in our own day? Christian leaders are tempted to shift the gospel to their own message instead of emphasizing their agreement with the teaching of the apostles.

This is one reason why Anglicans measure their teaching to the creeds of the church. Every week in worship we say a creed (either right before or right after the sermon.) We want to emphasize that the faith we have received - the faith that all Christians have agreed on - we continue to adhere to. We value the history of the church (teachers, theologians, councils, and creeds) because we recognize that this is how the Holy Spirit has continued to lead the church. We want to be in agreement with the rest of Christianity and with the teaching of the apostles because the true gospel agrees with apostolic teaching.

POINT #3 : THE TRUE GOSPEL CAN BE DENIED THROUGH BEHAVIOR

So far, Paul has communicated that the true gospel is all about having right doctrine and beliefs. On the other hand, Paul seems to show that the gospel can be denied not only by having the wrong beliefs but by living in a way that contradicts the gospel.

Paul reminds the Galatians in 2:11-14 of the time when Peter came to Antioch. During his visit at first, he was eating with both Jews and Greeks – demonstrating that the gospel had made them one people. But when the “party of the circumcised” arrived and would not eat with non-Jews, Paul says that Peter started acting differently and was acting in hypocrisy. Even Paul’s partner Barnabas was led astray.

Galatians 2:14 *“When I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel ... ”*

Why is this important?

Teaches us that both what we believe and how we behave are both essential aspects of holding to the gospel.

Reminds us that disagreements in the church today tend to be about moral issues. Some Christians feel like moral issues should not divide us if we agree on the gospel. Is this true?

As a matter of principle, Paul thinks NO – he is indicating that you can deny the gospel by the way you live. The way you live is inseparable from the gospel itself. Therefore, this can be a church-dividing thing.