

Bad News About the Good News

The lad at my front door was trying to sell me a subscription to a weekly newspaper, and he was very persuasive. "It only costs a quarter a week," he said, "and the best thing about this newspaper is that it prints *only the good news!*"

In a world filled with trouble, it is becoming more and more difficult to find any "good news," so perhaps the newspaper was a bargain after all. To the person who has trusted Christ as Saviour, the real "good news" is the Gospel: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; . . . He was buried, and . . . He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). It is the good news that sinners can be forgiven and go to heaven because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross. The Good News of salvation through faith in Christ is the most important message in the world.

This message had changed Paul's life and, through him, the lives of others. But now this message was being attacked, and Paul was out to defend the truth of the Gospel. Some false teachers

had invaded the churches of Galatia—churches Paul had founded—and were teaching a different message from that which Paul had taught.

As you begin to read Paul's letter to the Galatian Christians, you can tell immediately that something is radically wrong, because he does not open his letter with his usual praise to God and prayer for the saints. He has no time! Paul is about to engage in a battle for the truth of the Gospel and the liberty of the Christian life. False teachers are spreading a false "gospel" which is a mixture of law and grace, and Paul is not going to stand by and do nothing.

How does Paul approach the Galatian Christians in his attempt to teach them the truth about the Gospel? In these opening verses, the apostle takes three definite steps as he prepares to fight this battle.

1. He Explains His Authority (1:1-5)

Later on in his letter, Paul will deal with the Galatians on the basis of affection (4:12-20); but at the outset he is careful to let them know the authority he has from the Lord. He has three sources of authority:

His ministry (1:1-2). "Paul, an apostle. . . ." In the early days of the church, God called special men to do special tasks. Among them were the *apostles*. The word means "one who is sent with a commission." While He was ministering on earth, Jesus had many *disciples* ("learners"), and from these He selected 12 *apostles* (Mark 3:13-19). Later, one of the requirements for an apostle was that he have witnessed the resurrection (Acts 1:21-22; 2:32; 3:15). Of course, Paul himself was neither a disciple nor an apostle during Christ's earthly

ministry, but he had seen the risen Lord and been commissioned by Him (Acts 9:1-18; 1 Cor. 9:1).

Paul's miraculous conversion and call to apostleship created some problems. From the very beginning, he was apart from the original apostles. His enemies said that he was not a true apostle for this reason. Paul is careful to point out that he had been made an apostle by Jesus Christ just as much as had the original Twelve. His apostleship was not from human selection and approval, but by divine appointment. Therefore, he had the authority to deal with the problems in the Galatian churches.

But in his ministry, Paul had a second basis for authority: *he had founded the churches in Galatia*. He was not writing to them as a stranger, but as the one who had brought them the message of life in the beginning! This letter reveals Paul's affection for these believers (see 4:12-19). Unfortunately, this affection was not being returned to him.

This matter of the founding of the Galatian churches has kept serious Bible students at work for many years. The problem stems from the meaning of the word *Galatia*. Several hundred years before the birth of Christ, some fierce tribes migrated from Gaul (modern France) into Asia Minor, and founded Galatia, which simply means "the country of the Gauls." When the Romans reorganized the ancient world, they made Galatia a part of a larger province that included several other areas, and they called the entire province Galatia. So, back in Paul's day, when a person talked about Galatia, you could not be sure whether he meant the smaller country of Galatia or the larger Roman province.

Bible students are divided over whether Paul wrote to churches in the *country* of Galatia or in the *province* of Galatia. The former view is called

the "north Galatian theory" and the latter the "south Galatian theory." The matter is not finally settled, but the evidence seems to indicate that Paul wrote to churches in the southern part of the province of Galatia—Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe—churches he founded on his first missionary journey (Acts 13—14).

Paul always had a loving concern for his converts and a deep desire to see the churches he had founded glorify Christ (see Acts 15:36; 2 Cor. 11:28). He was not content to lead men and women to Christ and then abandon them. (For an example of his "after-care," read 1 Thes. 2.)

When Paul heard that false teachers had begun to capture his converts and lead them astray, he was greatly concerned—and rightly so. After all, teaching new Christians how to live for Christ is as much a part of Christ's commission as winning them (Matt. 28:19-20). Sad to say, many of the Galatian Christians had turned away from Paul, their "spiritual father" in the Lord, and were now following legalistic teachers who were mixing Old Testament Law with the Gospel of God's grace. (We call these false teachers "Judaizers" because they were trying to entice Christians back into the Jewish religious system.)

So, Paul had a ministry as an apostle, and specifically as the founder of the Galatian churches. As such, he had the authority to deal with the problems in the churches. But there was a second source of authority:

His message (1:3-4). From the very beginning, Paul clearly states the message of the Gospel, because it was this message that the Judaizers were changing. The Gospel centers in *a Person*—Jesus Christ, the Son of God. This Person paid *a price*

—He gave Himself to die on the cross. (You will discover that the cross is important in the Galatian letter, see 2:19-21; 3:1, 13; 4:5; 5:11, 24; 6:12-14.) Christ paid the price that He might achieve a *purpose*—delivering sinners from bondage.

"Liberty in Christ" is the dominant theme of Galatians. (Check the word *bondage* in 2:4; 4:3, 9, 24-25; 5:1.) The Judaizers wanted to lead the Christians out of the liberty of grace into the bondage of law. Paul knew that bondage was not a part of the message of the Gospel, for Christ had died to set men free.

Paul's ministry and message were sources of spiritual authority, but so also was:

His motive (1:5). "To whom be glory for ever and ever!" The false teachers were not ministering for the glory of Christ, but for their own glory (see 6:12-14). Like false teachers today, the Judaizers were not busy winning lost people to Christ. Rather, they were stealing other men's converts and bragging about their statistics. But Paul's motive was pure and godly: he wanted to glorify Jesus Christ (see 1 Cor. 6:19-20; 10:31-33).

Paul has now explained his authority. He is ready for a second step as he begins this battle for the liberty of the Christian.

2. He Expresses His Anxiety (1:6-7)

"I am amazed that you are so quickly moving away!" This is the first reason for Paul's anxiety: the Galatians were *deserting the grace of God*. (The verb indicates they were in the process of deserting and had not fully turned away.)

Paul strikes while the iron is hot. God had called them in His grace, and saved them from their sins. Now they are moving from grace back into

law. They are abandoning liberty for legalism! And they are doing it so quickly, without consulting Paul, their "spiritual father," or giving time for the Holy Spirit to teach them. They have become infatuated with the religion of the Judaizers, just the way little children follow a stranger because he offers them candy.

"The grace of God" is a basic theme in this letter (1:3, 6, 15; 2:9, 21; 5:4; 6:18). Grace is simply God's favor to undeserving sinners. The words "grace" and "gift" go together, because salvation is the gift of God through His grace (Eph. 2:8-10). The Galatian believers were not simply "changing religions" or "changing churches" but were actually abandoning the very grace of God! To make matters worse, they were deserting the very God of grace! God had called them and saved them; now they were deserting Him for human leaders who would bring them into bondage.

We must never forget that the Christian life is a living relationship with God through Jesus Christ. A man does not become a Christian merely by agreeing to a set of doctrines; he becomes a Christian by submitting to Christ and trusting Him (Rom. 11:6). You cannot mix grace and works, because the one excludes the other. Salvation is the gift of God's grace, purchased for us by Jesus Christ on the cross. To turn from grace to law is to desert the God who saved us.

But they were guilty of another sin that gave Paul great anxiety: *they were perverting the Gospel of God*. The Judaizers claimed to be preaching "the Gospel," but there cannot be two gospels, one centered in works and the other centered in grace. "They are not preaching another gospel," writes Paul, "but a *different* message—one so different

from the true Gospel that it is no gospel at all." Like the cultists today, the Judaizers would say, "We believe in Jesus Christ—but we have something wonderful *to add* to what you already believe." As if any man could "add" something better to the grace of God!

The word translated *pervert* in verse 7 is used only three times in the New Testament (Acts 2:20; James 4:9; Gal. 1:7). It means "to turn about, to change into an opposite character." The word could be translated "to reverse." In other words, the Judaizers had reversed the Gospel—they had turned it around and taken it back into the Law! Later in this letter, Paul explains how the law was preparation for the coming of Christ, but the Judaizers had a different interpretation. To them, the law and the Gospel went together. "Except ye be circumcised after the manner [law] of Moses, ye cannot be saved" (Acts 15:1).

What was this "deserting and perverting" doing to the Galatian Christians? It was troubling them (Gal. 1:7). This verb *trouble* carries with it the idea of perplexity, confusion, and unrest. You get some idea of the force of this word when you see how it is used in other places. *Trouble* describes the feelings of the disciples in the ship during the storm (Matt. 14:26). It also describes the feelings of King Herod when he heard that a new king had been born (Matt. 2:3). No wonder Paul was anxious for his converts: they were going through great agitation because of the false doctrines that had been brought to the churches. Grace always leads to peace (see Gal. 1:3), but the believers had deserted grace and therefore had no peace in their hearts.

Keep in mind that God's grace involves some-

thing more than man's salvation. We not only are saved by grace, but we are to live by grace (1 Cor. 15:10). We stand in grace; it is the foundation for the Christian life (Rom. 5:1-2). Grace gives us the strength we need to be victorious soldiers (2 Tim. 2:1-4). Grace enables us to suffer without complaining, and even to use that suffering for God's glory (2 Cor. 12:1-10). When a Christian turns away from living by God's grace, he must depend on his own power. This leads to failure and disappointment. This is what Paul means by "fallen from grace" (Gal. 5:4)—moving out of the sphere of grace into the sphere of law, ceasing to depend on God's resources and depending on our own resources.

No wonder Paul was anxious. His friends in Christ were deserting the God of grace, perverting the grace of God, and reverting to living by the flesh and their own resources. They had begun their Christian lives in the Spirit, but now they were going to try to continue them in the power of the flesh (Gal. 3:3).

Having explained his authority and expressed his anxiety, Paul now takes the third step:

3. He Exposes His Adversaries (1:8-10)

"Make love, not war!" may have been a popular slogan, but it is not always feasible. Doctors must make war against disease and death; sanitary engineers must war against filth and pollution; legislators must war against injustice and crime. And they all fight *because of something they love!*

"Ye that love the Lord, hate evil" (Ps. 97:10). "Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good" (Rom. 12:9). Paul waged war against the false teachers because he loved the truth, and be-

cause he loved those whom he had led to Christ. Like a loving father who guards his daughter until she is married, Paul watched over his converts lest they be seduced into sin (2 Cor. 11:1-4).

The Judaizers are identified by *the false gospel that they preached*. The test of a man's ministry is not popularity (Matt. 24:11), or miraculous signs and wonders (Matt. 24:23-24), but his faithfulness to the Word of God (see Isa. 8:20; 1 Tim. 4; 1 John 4:1-6; and note that 2 John 5-11 warns us not to encourage those who bring false doctrine). Christ had committed the Gospel to Paul (1 Cor. 15:1-8), and he, in turn, had committed it to other faithful servants (1 Tim. 1:11 and 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:13 and 2:2). But the Judaizers had come along and substituted their false gospel for the true Gospel, and for this sin, Paul pronounced them accursed. The word he uses is *anathema*, which means "dedicated to destruction." (Read Acts 23:14 for a forceful illustration of the meaning of this word.) No matter who the preacher may be—an angel from heaven or even Paul himself—if he preaches any other gospel, he is accursed!

But there is a second characteristic of Paul's adversaries: *the false motives that they practiced*. His enemies accused Paul of being a compromiser and "adjusting" the Gospel to fit the Gentiles. Perhaps they twisted the meaning of Paul's statement, "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). They said, "When Paul is with the Jews, he lives like a Jew; but when he is with the Gentiles, he lives like the Gentiles. He is a man-pleaser, and therefore you cannot trust him!"

But in reality, it was the false teacher who was the man-pleaser. "These men are paying you spe-

cial attention, but not sincerely," Paul wrote (4:17). "They want to shut you off from me, so that you may keep on paying them special attention" (WMS). Later, Paul also exposes the false teachers as the compromisers, going back to Old Testament practices so that they would not be persecuted by the Jewish people (6:12-15). Paul was definitely *not* a man-pleaser. His *ministry* did not come from man (1:1), nor did his *message* come from man (1:12). Why, then, should he be afraid of men? Why should he seek to please men? His heart's desire was to please Christ.

When Verdi produced his first opera in Florence, the composer stood by himself in the shadows and kept his eye on the face of one man in the audience—the great Rossini. It mattered not to Verdi whether the people in the hall were cheering him or jeering him; all he wanted was a smile of approval from the master musician. So it was with Paul. He knew what it was to suffer for the Gospel, but the approval or disapproval of men did not move him. "Therefore also we have as our ambition . . . to be pleasing to Him" (2 Cor. 5:9, NASB). Paul wanted the approval of Christ.

The servant of God is constantly tempted to compromise in order to attract and please men. When D. L. Moody was preaching in England, a worker came to him on the platform and told him that a very important nobleman had come into the hall. "May the meeting be a blessing to him!" was Moody's reply, and he preached just as before, without trying to impress anybody.

Paul was not a politician; he was an ambassador. His task was not to "play politics" but to proclaim a message. These Judaizers, on the other hand, were cowardly compromisers who mixed law and grace,

hoping to please both Jews and Gentiles, but never asking whether or not they were pleasing God.

We have noted three steps Paul took toward engaging these false teachers in battle: he explained his authority, expressed his anxiety, and exposed his adversaries. But how is he going to attack his enemies? What approach will he use to convince the Galatian believers that all they need is faith in God's grace? A quick survey of the entire letter shows that Paul is a master defender of the Gospel. Take time to read the entire letter at one sitting, and, as you read, note the three approaches that Paul takes.

His first approach is *personal* (chaps. 1-2). He reviews his own personal experience with Jesus Christ and the message of the Gospel. He points out that he had received the Gospel independently, from the Lord and not from the 12 apostles (1:11-24), but that they had approved his message and his ministry (2:1-10). Furthermore, Paul had even defended the Gospel when Peter, the leading apostle, had compromised his earlier stand (2:11-21). The autobiographical section of the letter proves that Paul was not a "counterfeit apostle," but that his message and ministry were true to the faith.

Chapters 3 and 4 are *doctrinal*, and in them Paul presents several arguments to establish that sinners are saved by faith and grace, not by works and law. First he appeals to their own experiences (3:1-5). Then he goes back to the Old Testament law in 3:6-14 to show that even Abraham and the prophets understood salvation as being by grace through faith. Having mentioned the law, Paul now explains why the law was given originally (3:15—4:18). He then uses the story of Sarah and Hagar

to illustrate the relationship of law and grace (4:19-31).

The final two chapters of the letter are *practical* in emphasis, as Paul turns from argument to application. The Judaizers accused Paul of promoting lawlessness because he preached the Gospel of the grace of God; so in this section, Paul explains the relationship between the grace of God and practical Christian living. He shows that living by grace means liberty, not bondage (5:1-12); depending on the Spirit, not the flesh (5:13-26); living for others, not for self (6:1-10); and living for the glory of God, not for man's approval (6:11-18). It is either one series of actions or the other—law or grace—but it cannot be both.

The Galatian letter is not a book to be taken lightly. Galatians was Martin Luther's charter of liberty during the Reformation. Luther's writings, in turn, brought the truth of salvation by faith to John Wesley's heart in that little meeting on Aldersgate Street in London on May 24, 1738. It was Wesley whom God used in such a remarkable way to spearhead revival in the British Isles, leading eventually to the founding of the Methodist Church. And that revival positively affected the entire English-speaking world. As we study Galatians, we are participating in a tremendous spiritual chain reaction that even today could result in another revival.

A Suggested Outline of Galatians

Theme: Christian liberty in the grace of God (5:1)

**I. PERSONAL: GRACE AND THE
GOSPEL—chapters 1—2**

1. Grace declared in Paul's message—1:1-10
2. Grace demonstrated in Paul's life—1:11-24
3. Grace defended in Paul's ministry—2:1-21
 - (1) Before the church collectively—2:1-10
 - (2) Before Peter personally—2:11-21

**II. DOCTRINAL: GRACE AND THE LAW—
chapters 3—4**

1. The personal argument—3:1-5
2. The scriptural argument—3:6-14
3. The logical argument—3:15-29
4. The historical argument—4:1-11
5. The sentimental argument—4:12-18
6. The allegorical argument—4:19-31

**III. PRACTICAL: GRACE AND THE
CHRISTIAN LIFE—chapters 5—6**

1. Liberty, not bondage—5:1-12
2. The Spirit, not the flesh—5:13-26
3. Others, not self—6:1-10
4. God's glory, not man's praise—6:11-18