

Let Freedom Ring: Thoughts On Galatians – Part 3

By: Keith Keyser

“I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.” Gal. 1:6-8

What could possibly surprise the veteran apostle who traveled across the Roman empire preaching to Jews and Gentiles from all walks of life and belief systems? Surely interacting with people from so many diverse cultures and having many varied experiences would prepare Paul for anything. Yet Galatians 1:6 registers his astonishment on account of the commencement of their sudden defection from the Lord. “I marvel that you are turning away so soon...” reveals both the apostle’s perplexity and the illogical behavior of his Galatian converts. With very little struggle – “so soon” – they were beginning to embrace an aberrant counterfeit of the genuine glad tidings of the Lord Jesus. This was not merely an alternate strain of Christian thought; rather, the Galatians risked losing the truth of Christ entirely by dabbling in a false Gospel.

If It Isn’t Broken, Don’t Fix It

New teachers arrived in Galatia propounding a “new and improved” gospel, which differed significantly from the original version that they heard from Paul. True, they had not deleted anything from the message: they apparently still professed to believe in the deity of Christ and the inspiration of the Bible. The error lay in what they had added to the glad tidings. They suggested that the Mosaic Law was necessary for justification and sanctification. In other words, salvation depended on faith in Christ plus adherence to the law (especially circumcision and kosher food laws.) Tampering with the Gospel is extremely dangerous. John 17:3 explains the momentous issues involved: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” Since its truths bring one into a living relationship with the Lord Himself, altering its tenets destroys the possibility of such a connection. In other words, adding to the gospel transforms it into spiritual cyanide.

The false doctrine being foisted upon the Galatians was particularly dangerous, because it had a veneer of morality and religion about it. Those preaching it professed to be Christians, and – judging by certain allusions in Galatians 1 and 2 – claimed to represent the latest doctrinal teaching in the Jerusalem church. The fact that Paul says “Though we or an angel from heaven preach...” (v. 8) indicates that they were charismatic preachers, who seemed to carry equal weight with the apostles. Like a glorious angel, they looked and sounded good. One commentator describes the pervasive threat from this kind of false teaching:

The most destructive dangers to the church have never been atheism, pagan religions, or cults that openly deny Scripture, but rather supposedly Christian movements that accept

so much biblical truth that their unscriptural doctrines seem relatively insignificant and harmless. But a single drop of poison in a large container can make all the water lethal. And a single false idea that in any way undercuts God's grace poisons the whole system of belief. Paul would not tolerate a single drop of legalism being intermixed with God's pure grace. To turn away from any part of the grace of Christ is to turn away from the power of God to that of human effort.ⁱ

It was obvious to the Galatians that pagan beliefs like Mithraism and Stoic philosophy were false; but the Judaizing doctrine was especially attractive because it came from supposedly familiar sources. Paul later warned the Ephesian elders of "savage wolves" coming from outside their assemblies. More troubling, however, was the caution that he gave regarding imposters from within their meetings who would speak perverse things in order to build up their own following (Acts 20:28-31.) Even today the worst enemies of the truth often arise from evangelical circles (e.g. the Emergent Church movement.) Regardless of how appealing the spokesman looks or sounds, if they add to or subtract from the biblical gospel, they must be rejected.

In Danger Of Becoming Doctrinal Quislings

Paul says that the Galatians are beginning to act in a spiritually disloyal manner. "Turning away" in verse 6 translates a word that was notorious for philosophical and political treachery. As Stott points out: "It signifies 'to transfer one's allegiance'. It is used of soldiers in the army who revolt or desert, and of men who change sides in politics or philosophy. Thus, a certain Dionysius of Heracleia, who left the Stoics to become a member of the rival philosophical school, an Epicurean, was called *ho metathemenos*, a 'turncoat'."ⁱⁱ The Septuagint, which is the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament, used the word to depict the effect that Jezebel had on King Ahab in 1 Kings 21:25.ⁱⁱⁱ Her insidious influence turned him from nominal Jehovah-worship to the adoration of idols like Baal and Ashtoreth. In Galatians the Greek verb is in the middle voice affirming that the Galatians are actively removing themselves from the Lord by their embrace of error.^{iv}

Abandoning The Savior

Tragically, they were deserting a person not a dogma. The *New King James Version* rightly capitalizes "Him" in verse 6, acknowledging that God is the One in view. It is no use claiming that it does not matter what one believes, so long as they have Jesus. Such drivel sounds appealing to Postmodern ears, but the Bible makes it clear that a relationship with the Living God through Christ is the result of believing in the Lord Jesus as the Son of God, and receiving by faith the benefits of His saving work through His sacrificial death, vindicating resurrection, and victorious ascension (Jn. 1:12-13; 3:16; 5:24; 20:30-31; Acts 4:12; Rom. 3:23-26; 5:1; 8:1; 10:9; etc.) As Boice powerfully describes it: "Embracing legalism means rejecting God, according to Paul's reasoning, because it means substituting man for God in one's life. It is

significant that once again even in the space of a few words (‘who called you by the grace of Christ’) Paul reiterates the true nature of the gospel: (1) it is of God, for God does the calling, and (2) it is of grace rather than of merit.”^v To depart from the apostolic gospel as it was first preached in Galatia is to put oneself under a false system which results in eternal damnation (1 Jn. 5:11-12.) Moreover, preachers of a fraudulent gospel place themselves squarely under God’s curse (Gal. 1:8-9.)

The Truth And Nothing But The Truth

Thankfully, the phrase “turning from” is in the present tense, meaning that the Galatians had not yet fully embraced the fake gospel. There was still time to adhere to the truth, and repudiate the Judaizers and their wicked perversion of the gospel. Paul asserts that some were “troubling” them. Indeed, to obscure Christ’s good news of grace and peace always troubles the church. Those who are really saved can never impassively accept a caricature of the glad tidings. Conversely, the genuine gospel unifies the people of God. “They were all together in one accord” is the great refrain of the early chapters of Acts as the Christians carried the Lord’s message forth to Jews and Gentiles. The famous hymn puts it well: “I love to tell the story for those who know it best, seem hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest.”^{vi} If believers genuinely love the Lord, they will love the New Testament gospel, and tenaciously hold to it against onslaughts from the religious and secular worlds.

ⁱ John MacArthur, *Galatians*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1996; electronic ed. (Logos), p. 14.

ⁱⁱ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians : Only One Way*. Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 1986, pp. 21-22; electronic ed. (Logos.)

Christian Maurer defines *metatithemi* thus: “‘to turn from,’ ‘to fall away,’ ‘to become apostate,’ ...” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Vol. 8, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich. electronic ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964, p. 161.

ⁱⁱⁱ W.E. Vine, *Collected Writings of W.E. Vine: Galatians*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, electronic edition (Logos.)

A modern translation of the LXX of 1 Kgs. 21:25 reads: “Yet Achaab did act foolishly when he sold himself to do what was evil before the Lord, as his wife Jezebel **led him astray**.” (boldface mine, indicating the use of *metatithemi*; *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, Oxford: The University Press, 2007, p. 316.) Available for free usage here: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/>

^{iv} W.E. Vine, *Collected Writings of W.E. Vine: Galatians*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, electronic edition (Logos.)

^v James Montgomery Boice, *Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Galatians*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977; electronic ed.

^{vi} A. Katherine Hankey, “I love to tell the story”, accessed at: <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/i/i/iltts.htm> on 8/26/10.