
Defecting from the Gospel

Galatians 1:1-10

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We have all had times where we knew a friend or a spouse was aggravated with us. Sometimes we know what we have done that has upset them. Sometimes, not. But often we can tell. We see it in their body language. We can sense the tenseness. There is a coldness, a sort-of intense quietness, that is forceful and unmistakable. Other times, it is a growing and gathering anger with rising tones. The sense of astonished outrage at the silly or serious thing we did hurtles toward us.

Paul is like that here. There is a deep sense of an approaching storm that swells from the opening and breaks with thunderous force through the center of the epistle. The apostle is not a happy man. He is deeply disturbed. He sees a dire catastrophe about to overtake much loved ones and he is forceful in his speech. His are no meek words as the poisonous snake is about to strike. They are sharp and true, designed to cause his hearer to draw back to safety.

At times, this preacher and his preaching will sound the same way. In our own time and for people I love much, there are disturbing and dreadful dangers that lurk just outside. Here, the gospel is loved, learned and lived. But we are awash in false gospels. If we understand the dire consequences of failing to hold the line in the gospel, then we will be passionate about these things as well. I have determined to take Galatians as a spotlight and shine it on the creeping and crawling roaches fouling God's people with the false gospels of this day.

His Assertion of Authority for the Gospel

(v.1-2)

The epistle opens with an abrupt and attention getting greeting. It can hardly be called a greeting. His righteous indignation oozes from the first sentence.

¹ Paul, an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— ² and all the brothers who are with me,

To the churches of Galatia:

He is an apostle, not by human standing but by Divine sending.

In the Denial of Human Standing

He is not sent from a merely human agency. His being an apostle was not commissioned through man. He is not carrying around a certificate that shows a church or group setting him aside and authorizing him as an apostle. The gospel he preaches is not the consensus of a group who appointed him and which can be challenged or overturned.

He is not sent through a merely human agency. His being an apostle is not certified through man. He is not accountable to some human agency.¹ He is responsible to be faithful to the Scriptures and to the revelation he has received. His credentials in the gospel and the content of his gospel are Divinely given.

In the Declaration of Divine Sending

His apostleship is through the Triune God. Challenging Paul's credentials is challenging God's commissioning. He is sent by the Father and Son. The Father and Son are one in authorizing His ministry. There can be no undermining the ministry by dividing the Godhead. The gospel message and messengers are Triune.

His apostleship centers on the resurrected Christ. This is the only direct mention of the resurrection of Christ in the epistle. It emphasizes the importance of that event to Paul's apostleship, for he was not called during the earthly ministry of the Lord but by the resurrected Christ. Further, it locates the source of his ministry and message in the new creation. His commission from God was given from heaven through the resurrected Christ. Only the true apostles can say this. Those challenging him cannot say this.

The implication here for them and for us is that the messenger and the message are genuine. He faced the constant insinuations and accusations designed to undermine his ministry. We do to. But it tends to come through teaching and through commentaries that do not accept the authorship or final authority of the epistle itself. Paul's assertions here are not just to counter the particular opponents he faced in his day, but those who would undercut the gospel today by eroding our confidence the apostolic deposit of truth, the Scriptures.

His Summation of the Essence of the Gospel (v.3-5)

Summaries are great things. Prize brevity; speak clearly, say things richly. That is what we have here where Paul stresses the self-sacrifice of Christ, a theme that anticipates several powerful passages (e.g. 2:20-21).

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, ⁵ to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

He also rings the note of deliverance, which is given a strong eschatological flavor. There is a great contrast between the *present evil age* and the new coming age as the fulfillment of God's promises. God's will is behind these events. So, the greatness of Christ's work leads to a doxology, something absent from the opening of every other letter. [*New Bible Commentary, adapted*]². But let's pause to expand and explain.

Its Divine Source

Salvation centered on God gives enabling power and brings relational peace.

It is God's free favor towards us in grace. Grace is the center piece of the gospel. God saves His people as an act of His free favor. He saves His people by giving them the desire and the ability to believe and repent, to pursue Him in Christ all without detracting from His glory.

It is God settling His own wrath and reversing our hostility so that we, the sinner and the Sovereign may be at peace. God's wrath is satisfied as it is poured out on the Substitute. Our hatred and rebellion of God is turned so that we are reconciled, we are brought back to God.

A modern shift in the gospel is subtle and dangerous. It makes salvation primarily a wholeness of people, spiritual healing and health. It minimizes our terrible rebellion against God, our horrific sins against Him and His dreadful anger against us with the ghastly punishment awaiting the unrepentant. It shifts weight from our being the supplicant and makes God the petitioner. We need a restoration of God to the center. His grace sovereignly draws us unto Himself. His peace welcomes those so brought near by the cross.

Its Voluntary Sacrifice

One of the wonders of the gospel is Jesus' voluntary giving of Himself as the sacrifice. He was not dragged to the cross against His will. He gave Himself to the cross. He placed Himself under the Father's will and in front of the Father's wrath. He was a substitute. His death was the acceptable sacrifice.

The sacrifice of Jesus is for sins. It is payment for our sin. It is bearing the punishment due our sin. It is washing away the stain and guilt of our sin. The cross does not show the worth of man. The cross is a public demonstration of the depravity of man, both in its necessity and in its execution. A life was given and a death experienced so that we who were dead might now have life. And in having life, our sins are forgiven. Our sins are cleansed. Our sins have no present power over us.

Its Delivering Strategy

Jesus' sacrifice for sins, the work of the cross delivers us from this present evil world. In this short phrase, Paul anticipates so much of what he will teach in chapters 2-4. In other words, there is an actual, present effect of the cross for us in this age. We often think of the phrase "this world" as primarily referring to a geographical location in the cosmos as though the author said, "this earth." This mistake then confuses and minimizes what Paul is getting at.

The world here is the realm or the sphere of sin. It is where sin dominates and controls. It is the place where sin's power ruthlessly ruled. Paul distinctly thinks of this as wrapped up in this fallen order. But we have been transferred from it into the realm where God's Son rules, the Kingdom of God.

This grand salvation strategy also has a future, not yet aspect. Thus, believing the gospel sets your hope on heaven where Christ is. It orients you forward to the new heavens and new earth wherein righteousness dwells. The gospel teaches us a present deliverance from the power of sin by our transition to a new realm, the new creation. The gospel teaches us a future deliverance from the presence of sin by our arrival in the presence of God and the making of all things new.

Its Decisive Shaping

What has unfolded in redemptive history has been according to the determining will of God. God is working out the details of His eternal plan within time and space. This is not just pointing to a purpose for the cross. It surely includes that, and much more. The flow of history from creation, through the fall, patriarchs, Israel and to Jesus is all decisively determined by God so that His purposes will be fulfilled. This establishes the foundation

for later arguing that Old Testament history, the events and their order, are a pattern for our experience.

Its Doxological Scope

All things are for the glory of God. This what our Bible says. This is what our confession says. And with it we formally agree. But when it comes to the practical reality of what most actually think the gospel is about, they are glory challenged. Most think that salvation makes much of them; that it shows their worth and value and importance, their central place in the universe. Nearly everything you hear on religious media and in religious books and pulpits will leave you with this distinct impression if not outright affirmation.

But it is not so. The aim of the gospel is ultimately the glory of God.

This is an ought – this is what the gospel ought to do. It shapes the message and the methods. Any way of saying the gospel and any context for the giving of the gospel that lowers the cross and elevates man is already missing the mark. The glory of God functions as a standard. We know are we hearing the gospel in all its truth when God is magnified in it.

This is a surety – this is what the gospel will do. The true gospel will in the present and in future, bring glory to God. His weightiness, brightness and largeness is clearly seen when the gospel is taught, received, believed and lived. So, make no mistake – God will be glorified in the gospel.

So, we have an important question: is the way you think of the gospel full of glory? How can we know when it is not?

When we cannot speak it clearly. What you do not know you cannot glorify God with. What you cannot write or say clearly you do not understand. Would you be able to write it out this morning? Can you articulate the gospel in a way that is consistent with the Bible?

When we cannot speak it confidently. Many of you hesitate in evangelism because you are afraid you will not communicate it correctly. So, if you cannot say the gospel to someone else clearly enough for them to be saved, how is then that you can believe yourself for your own salvation?

When we do not live it consistently. Is the gospel something that got you into heaven but hasn't gotten you out of the world? Do you, having been saved by the gospel now try to live by the flesh and the world? Has your salvation saved you from sin?

So, this is the gospel. If we believe it this way, then, what follows will not shock us unless we find ourselves in their shoes.

His Indignation over their Abandoning the Gospel (v. 6-9)

This is the place in a normal letter where Paul usually sounds of a note of thanksgiving and commendation. He usually sets the tone of his letter in his thanksgiving and begins to point to the central theme of the epistle. Here, there is neither thanksgiving nor commendation. It certainly sets the tone and points to the central problem; but his agitation and astonishment are visible and vocal.

⁶ 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— ⁷ not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. ⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. ⁹ As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

Its Surprising Consequence

(v.6a)

What they are believing and doing is shocking. They are deserting Christ so soon after professing Him. The Lord had summoned them to salvation, had called them in the realm of grace. In Christ's grace alone is their salvation, both at conversion and throughout their transformation. But having been drawn to Christ, now they are actively moving away from Him. This is couched in terms of *a desertion*. They are committing high treason by turning their backs on their gracious King, their glorious groom.

Its Turning Course

(v.6b)

How are they doing this? They are embracing a different gospel. Now this is qualified as not being a true gospel. It is another of a different kind. It is a false gospel. It is a flirtatious gospel. It is alluring them away from their beloved.

This is shocking to Paul. But frankly, to us, this is shocking in a different way. We simply do not see changing the gospel as a desertion of Christ. Pagan Christendom is filled with false gospels. Some are grace-plus; that is, they add works or Law or baptism or Popery or Mariolatry or *whatever* to the gospel. Others are gospel-minus; that is, they dilute the call of the gospel to holiness and substitute false promises in the gospel. When you embrace any of these as being true, you leave Christ. This is what the Bible says. Paul says that those who go back to Judaism or who add the Law to saving or transforming grace are not merely mistaken. They are committing high treason. They are deserting Christ. Movement towards error is movement away from Jesus.

Its Troubling Cause

(v.7)

How does this happen? There are those who want to the gospel. This is a fascinating statement that I want to look at closely.

First, Paul sees what is happening as causing trouble. He is deeply disturbed about this. He underscores it in the top and tail. Look at Galatians 6:17, "From now on let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." So those who want to distort the gospel are causing the churches and the apostle trouble. The word often means to persecute, to trouble with abuse and affliction. In other words, the false teachers bringing the false gospel are actually abusing, troubling, persecuting God's people. This is no less true today. Great has been the trouble introduced into the church by those who distort the gospel. Even this morning, some of you may be uncomfortable at the stridency of my tone here. I believe I am reflecting Paul's tone.

Second, Paul points to their motivations. They desire to distort the gospel. Now they may not be conscious of this desire. Many people go through life oblivious to their motivations. However, people largely function oriented by their desires. The opponents to Paul's

gospel were often overt in their desire to enhance, improve, enlarge or give further essential truths necessary for a full gospel. But what they offered was a distortion. What they believed was wrong. Because they believed it, they desired others to believe as well. Those who received their distortions of the gospel deserted Jesus. I am sure no one intended to leave Jesus through enhancements to the gospel. Nevertheless, that was consequence for them.

Its Damning Condemnation

(v.8-9)

The betrayal is condemned in both its teachers and in its hearers. Now the thunderclap falls. The distant and growing rumble of the tornado of Paul's words now roars through their souls. Let those who preach a gospel different from what Paul taught and what they received, let them be accursed. Let them be, anathema. It is not too strong to say, let them be damned. Because, they are!

Why is this repeated? It is stated twice both for emphasis and for focus. This is what God thinks about those who trouble the church, whose distortions of the gospel cause people to desert Christ and embrace error. They are an anathema. A passion for the purity of the gospel and the glory of Christ fuels the emotions in this denunciation. While we must be careful of being strident over our own agendas and thoughts, strong words over soul damning errors is often warranted.

But notice the shift in focus. First, he places himself under the same stricture. If he, Paul, moves away from the gospel that they were taught, he is accursed. If an angel appears and preaches another gospel, he is accursed. Understand this, the gospel of the grace of God by faith alone in the work of Christ alone as taught in the whole Bible alone is the gospel. Second, if anyone teaches a gospel contrary from the one which they received and thus, by which they were saved, they are accursed. They are to be anathemized by the church and are accursed before God.

His Application of his Service in the Gospel

(v.10)

Briefly, because it is such an important implication from what he has said and because it closes what was opened in verse 1, consider how what he has said impacts his motives and his methods.

¹⁰ For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

In the Examination of His Motives

He answers a charge often laid to his account. His opponents said, "He has moved away from Judaism in his gospel of grace because he wants to please the Gentiles." In other words, he is accused of altering the message in order to please a target audience. But that is not his motive at all. While ministry may adapt to a culture, the message must never. He is not interested in having anyone's approval. He is not preaching or persuading according to man, but according to God. The ambiguity here I think is intentional. He knows that one's motives will shape one's message. He is intentional in seeking God's approval. After all, would someone merely trying to please the Galatian churches (who supported him financially!) hurl such denunciations at them?

In the Evaluation of His Ministry

Here is the crux of the matter. One cannot be a man pleaser and be Christ's servant. As one who is sent from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, Paul must at all points please God. He is God's servant. It is God's approval he must have. His ministry is served in God's kingdom. He is the servant of Christ.

The battle line is being drawn in the sand. People who crave man's approval will compromise the gospel. They will water down its call and distort its message so that people will accept it. The first half of the book of Galatians is going to narrate how this can happen to even the most surprising of people. But he, Paul, will not stoop to be a people pleaser. He will seek to be the servant of Christ and to serve in the gospel with such motives and methods that keep the message pure and glorify God.

Reflect and Respond

So, we must not allow any distortion of the gospel to go unopposed. Anyone teaching what is contrary to the Biblical, Pauline gospel is to be identified, named, called out and rebuked. It does not matter who it is. We must do so, not because we are trying to defend our own version of a creed, but because the Biblical gospel is clear and it is necessary. *When the gospel is corrupted, the way of salvation becomes confused and people are in danger of being condemned.* [*The Bible Knowledge Commentary, adapted*]³.

Believing error will send souls to hell. If you do not believe the gospel, or you believe a false gospel, you will go to hell.

This is the gospel Christ gave, Paul preached, was recorded in Scripture, we received and now we preach. Say it with me:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

So, I beg you in Christ's stead, to turn to Christ in the gospel. Believe in Him. Repent of your sins and your rebellion. Trust in the cross and the resurrection, in Christ's work alone. Rest in His work, not yours. Do not trust in past professions. Do not trust in past decisions. Do not trust in the good you have done and or are doing. Do not trust in your religious works or affections. Close with Christ today, now. Pray to Him. Plead with Him. Petition Him to save you and to receive you through Christ alone.

Notes

¹ This is not to say that other office bearers are not accountable to human review. Luke recognized the value of the Berean's examining what Paul was teaching against the Scripture. Everyone, including Paul, is under the Word of God.

²D. A. Carson, *New Bible Commentary : 21st Century Edition*, Rev. Ed. of: *The New Bible Commentary*. 3rd Ed. / Edited by D. Guthrie, J.A. Motyer. 1970., 4th ed. (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994).

³John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary : An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 2:591.