

Galatians

Paul's Authority and the Gospel

Galatians 1:1-5

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Scripture

Throughout human history, every person at some time or another has wrestled with the basic question of the human heart: “How can I find true happiness? How can I obtain peace, tranquility, and freedom from fear?”

Many solutions have been suggested. These include religion, rigorous asceticism, the affliction of the body, good works, etc. But every solution suggested by mankind has failed to discover the answer. Why? Because in his own strength and by his own wisdom man is totally incapable of discovering the answer. Only God, the One who created us, can supply the answer to the question.

Paul's letter to the Galatians is God's answer to the basic question of the human heart: “How can I find true happiness? How can I obtain peace, tranquility, and freedom from fear?”

True happiness is found only in a right relationship with God. Peace, tranquility, and freedom from fear can only be obtained from God in the person of Jesus Christ.

This is Paul's message to the Galatians. This is the good news—the gospel—that brings true happiness, peace, tranquility, and freedom from fear to every human heart. But, as is common in every era of history, the message of true happiness, peace, tranquility, and freedom was being distorted by false teachers in the Galatian churches. And that is the reason why Paul wrote this letter.

Let us now read Galatians 1:1-5:

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

To the churches in Galatia:

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, ⁴ who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and

Father, ⁵ to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Galatians 1:1-5)

Introduction

Paul's letter to the Galatians is a bomb! It is dynamite! Perhaps no piece of literature in the history of Western civilization has been as profoundly influential as Paul's letter to the Galatians.

In the late 1730s a small group of men literally changed the face of Western civilization. Led by John and Charles Wesley, hundreds of thousands of people became Christians. This happened on both sides of the Atlantic, in America as well as in Britain. It was a tremendous movement of God, sometimes known as the Great Awakening. Initially these men were seekers; they were not yet Christians themselves. One of them was a man named William Holland. He records in his diary that on May 17, 1738, he was "providentially directed to Martin Luther's Commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians." He continues:

I carried it round to Mr. Charles Wesley, who was sick at Mr. Bray's, as a very precious treasure that I had found, and we three sat down together, Mr. Charles Wesley reading the Preface aloud. At the words, "What, have we then nothing to do? No, nothing! but only accept of Him who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption," there came such a power over me as I cannot well describe; my great burden fell off in an instant; my heart was so filled with peace and love that I burst into tears. . . . My companions, perceiving me so affected, fell on their knees and prayed. When I afterwards went into the street, I could scarcely feel the ground I trod upon.

A few days later Charles Wesley became a Christian. And then a few days after that John Wesley became a Christian. The result was an incredible impact upon the world. And it all started because of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Let's review the background to Paul's letter to the Galatians.

Review

Paul and Barnabas were commissioned by the church in Antioch (in Syria) to go on a missionary journey to plant churches (cf. Acts 13, 14). Traveling via Cyprus they sailed to Perga (in Pamphylia). From Perga they went on to Antioch (in Pisidia), Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe, where Paul preached in each of those towns.

In these communities, Paul preached that true happiness, peace, tranquility, and freedom from fear is a free gift given by God to sinners who put their faith in Jesus Christ. This gift is never achieved by any amount of conformity to rules and regulations, even God-given regulations.

Paul's message was well received. These former pagans (4:8) believed Paul's message (3:1), were baptized (3:27), and received the Holy Spirit, who began working miracles among them (3:5). After some time, churches were established, and Paul and Barnabas returned to their home church in Syrian Antioch.

While Paul was in Syrian Antioch, some Jewish teachers traveled from Jerusalem to the churches Paul had established in Galatia. They said that Paul was wrong in his understanding of the gospel and that they had come to give the Galatians the full gospel (1:7). They began teaching that the Gentiles had to conform to the Law of Moses. And they also taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised. Apparently the Galatians believed the false teachers (also known as Judaizers) and started departing from the gospel that Paul had preached to them (1:6).

When Paul learned what was happening in the Galatian churches, he was greatly troubled. The deeply personal letter he wrote to the Galatian churches came from the grieving heart of a godly church planter whose spiritual children were buying into the error and lies of the Judaizers, who were undermining his authority (as an apostle) and his message (of the gospel of grace).

Lesson

In the opening paragraph of his letter to the Galatians Paul touches on two themes to which he will constantly return, his apostleship and his gospel. The false teachers in Galatia mounted a powerful attack on Paul's authority and his message.

They told the Galatians that Paul was not a true apostle. After all, he was not one of the Twelve. Indeed he was one who violently persecuted the Church of God after the resurrection of Jesus.

And since he was not a true apostle, his message was also false. He preached an "easy" gospel. All he required of his converts was faith in Jesus Christ. But what was really needed for salvation, said the false teachers, was faith in Jesus Christ *plus* adherence to the Law of Moses (which included circumcision).

Paul clearly saw the dangers of the Judaizers' false teaching. He immediately launches into a defense of his apostleship and his gospel. Notice how Paul begins his letter: "**Paul, an apostle** (not an impostor) . . . **Grace. . . to you.**"

These two terms—"apostle" and "grace"—were loaded words in that situation. If you understand their meaning, you have grasped the two main subjects of the letter to the Galatians.

In this brief greeting to the Galatians Paul summarizes his authority and his gospel.

I. Paul's Authority (1:1-2)

First, let's look at Paul's authority.

Following the custom of the time, Paul begins by stating his name: **Paul** (1:1). He then establishes his authority as an apostle. Paul gives three bases for his authority.

A. *The Title Apostle (1:1a)*

The first basis of Paul's authority was his right to the title apostle. He writes, "Paul, **an apostle**"(1:1a).

The word **apostle** means “envoy, ambassador, or messenger.” A number of men were called “apostles” who were envoys sent by the church. Barnabas is called an “apostle” in Acts 14:14.

But the Bible also uses the word **apostle** of someone who was specifically chosen, commissioned and sent by Jesus Christ to proclaim the good news of the gospel (cf. Mark 3:14).

Two qualifications were essential for a person to be this kind of an apostle: (1) he had to have been with Jesus throughout his whole ministry, and (2) he had to have been a witness of Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). The New Testament is clear that this band of apostles was small and unique.

Because Paul was not one of the original Twelve chosen, commissioned and sent by Jesus, he had to defend his apostleship in ways that the other apostles did not.

Paul explained to the church at Corinth that he was indeed a witness of Jesus’ resurrection. He said that Jesus “appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time. . . . Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me as to one abnormally born” (1 Corinthians 15:5-8).

Paul witnessed the resurrection of Jesus in a unique way. As he was traveling on the road to Damascus to imprison Christians there, “suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ ‘Who are you, Lord?’ Saul asked. ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,’ he replied” (Acts 9:3-5).

Paul also received his commission as an apostle of Jesus in a unique way. On that Damascus road, Jesus said to Paul, “Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you” (Acts 26:16).

And so Paul could claim the title **apostle** because he had been a witness of Jesus’ resurrection and because he had been specifically commissioned by Jesus to be an apostle.

B. The Manner in Which He Was Chosen (1:1b)

The second basis of Paul's authority was the manner in which he was chosen. Paul said that he was **“sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead”** (1:1b)

The false teachers were saying that Paul was not a true apostle, and that he was a self-appointed evangelist who had no authority to teach and to rule the churches. Paul emphatically states that his commission was not by human commission.

Paul says he was **sent not from men**, such as the Twelve or the leaders at Jerusalem or the church at Antioch. He did not attend school or complete a prescribed course to become an apostle.

Nor was Paul commissioned **by man**, such as Barnabas or anybody else. He did not become an apostle by the laying on of hands.

How did Paul become an apostle? He became an apostle **by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead**. Jesus called him, commissioned him, and set him apart for the office of apostle (cf. Acts 9:15-16; 26:15-18).

Now I am an ordained minister **from men and by man**. I had to attend seminary and obtain a Master of Divinity degree before I could be ordained. I did that. That was **from men**.

Next I went to a church and they examined me to see if I was fit to be ordained. They concluded that I could be ordained. And so, at the Chippewa Evangelical Free Church, I knelt and a group of men put their hands on me, and set me apart for the ministry of the gospel. “You are now an ordained minister of the gospel,” they said. That is **by man**. That is the kind of minister I am.

Not so with the apostle Paul. He said, “I am not that kind of apostle. Men had nothing to do with it whatsoever. I am an apostle directly called, commissioned, and sent by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.”

In other words, Paul's calling was *immediate*, whereas my calling was *mediated* from men and by man.

C. *The Relationship to His Colleagues (1:2)*

The third basis of Paul's authority is implied in his relationship to his colleagues.

Paul alone is the author of the letter **to the churches in Galatia**. Throughout the entire letter he addresses the churches in Galatia in the first person. However, in the greeting Paul mentions **all the brothers with me** (1:2). Why does he do that?

It would seem that before composing the letter and sending it he thoroughly discussed the issue with **all the brothers** who were with him at Antioch. So unanimous was their agreement with Paul's proposed method of handling the difficult situation that the apostle writes in the name of all.

Notice, by the way, that Paul clearly distinguishes himself from those who were with him at the time of writing. He unashamedly puts himself first and gives himself a title which he does not give them. They are **brothers**; he alone is **an apostle**.

So Paul defends his authority as an apostle on the basis of his right to the title apostle, on the basis of the manner in which he was chosen for that office, and, on the basis of his relationship to his colleagues.

Right up front in his letter Paul deals with the issue of authority that is present in every generation. There are fundamentally three kinds of authority.

First, there is tradition. People who hold to tradition say things like this: "I have always believed this." "My church has held to this teaching for hundreds of years." "The Church is the final authority in all these matters." This is often the view held by Baby Boomers and those who are older.

Second, there is experience. People who hold to experience say things like this: "I feel that this is true." "I believe this to be the truth." "I am guided by my conscience." This is often the view held by Modern, Postmodern, and Gen-X people.

Paul would have argued against both of these views with every breath in his body. If he was not divinely inspired in a unique and authoritative way, he was the most presumptuous of men, because he boldly and unequivocally claimed to speak and write in God's name. Paul was not an apostle of the Church, but an apostle of Christ. He spoke to the Church, not on behalf of the Church. And so, there is a third position, and that is *Paul's authority*. Paul, as an apostle, as an ambassador of Christ, is presenting God's truth to us. Any other view is deceptive and dangerous.

II. Paul's Gospel (1:3-4)

Let us turn now from Paul's authority to his gospel.

Paul sends the message of **grace** and **peace**. These are not formal and meaningless terms. They are pregnant with theological substance and, in fact, they summarize Paul's gospel of salvation.

Martin Luther said in his commentary on Galatians that the two fiends of every person are sin and a guilty conscience. **Grace**, he said, "releases sin," and **peace** "quiets a guilty conscience."

The source of salvation is **grace**, God's free undeserved favor, regardless of any human merit or works. The result of salvation is **peace**, or reconciliation—**peace** with God, **peace** with men, and **peace** within. And both **grace** and **peace** come **from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ** together.

In verse 4 Paul gives a succinct summary of the true gospel of **grace** and **peace**, showing its nature, its object, and its source.

A. *The Nature of the Gospel: Christ Died for Our Sins (1:4a)*

First, the nature of the gospel is that Christ died for our sins.

The heart of the gospel is about Jesus Christ, **who gave himself for our sins** (1:4a). Salvation is not earned by a person's efforts to eliminate sin. Salvation is received by trusting God's promise to forgive sin through the work of Jesus Christ.

Christ's death on behalf of sinners is the most essential part of the divine plan of redemption. The primary reason Christ came to earth was not to live but to die. Christ's teaching and miracles are meaningless unless they are understood in light of his atoning death. His earthly ministry would have portrayed the power and truth of a great and wonderful God—but a God with whom we could never be reconciled, because we had no way of getting rid of our sin. Sin cannot be erased by works (Romans 3:20). It has to be forgiven. That's why the gospel is such good news: Jesus **gave himself for our sins**.

B. The Purpose of the Gospel: Christ Died to Rescue Us (1:4b)

Second, the purpose of the gospel is **to rescue** us.

The only possible means by which God can save sinners and reconcile them to himself is through the death of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' death is, in fact, a rescue operation. The Greek word for **rescue** is *exaireo* and carries the idea of being rescued from danger. The word is used in Acts of the rescue of the Israelites from their Egyptian slavery (7:34), of the rescue of Peter from prison and Herod's clutches (12:11), and of the rescue of Paul from an infuriated mob about to lynch him (23:27). This verse in Galatians is the only place where the word is used metaphorically of salvation. Jesus died to rescue us.

Several years ago I had the privilege of hearing Dr. James Montgomery Boice preach at the Tenth Presbyterian Church. I vividly remember an illustration he gave for Psalm 91:4, which reads, "He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge." Dr. Boice told the story of a massive fire in a forest. There was an enormous amount of destruction. Trees and vegetation was destroyed; animals and birds were killed. Days after the fire when people were walking through the still-smoking debris, they came across a bird, burned and dead. They noticed that the bird had her wings spread out. When they turned the bird over they were surprised to discover several chicks beneath the dead mother.

The amazing thing is that these chicks were still alive! The mother had given her life to save the lives of her chicks.

That is how Jesus rescues us. He gives his life to rescue us from the destruction that will surely descend upon all who do not find their shelter in him.

C. The Source of the Gospel: Christ Died According to God's Will (1:4c)

And third, the source of our salvation is **the will of our God and Father**, who “so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Our rescue is because of the sovereign, gracious will of God.

We are not saved because of our will. We have no ability to rescue ourselves. Neither are we saved because of Christ's will alone. He did not act independently of the Father. In the cross, the will of the Father and the will of the Son were in perfect harmony. Our salvation is rooted in the will of our God and Father. Our salvation is therefore removed from our will and buried deep in the sovereign decree of God.

This is what William Holland discovered in reading Luther's preface to the Galatians.

Conclusion

What a marvelous salvation we have! What a marvelous answer we now have to the basic question of the human heart: “How can I find true happiness? How can I obtain peace, tranquility, and freedom from fear?”

It is no wonder, then, that the apostle bursts forth into an ascription of praise to God for our wonderful salvation at the end of his opening paragraph: **to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.** This, surely, is the response of our hearts as well.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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